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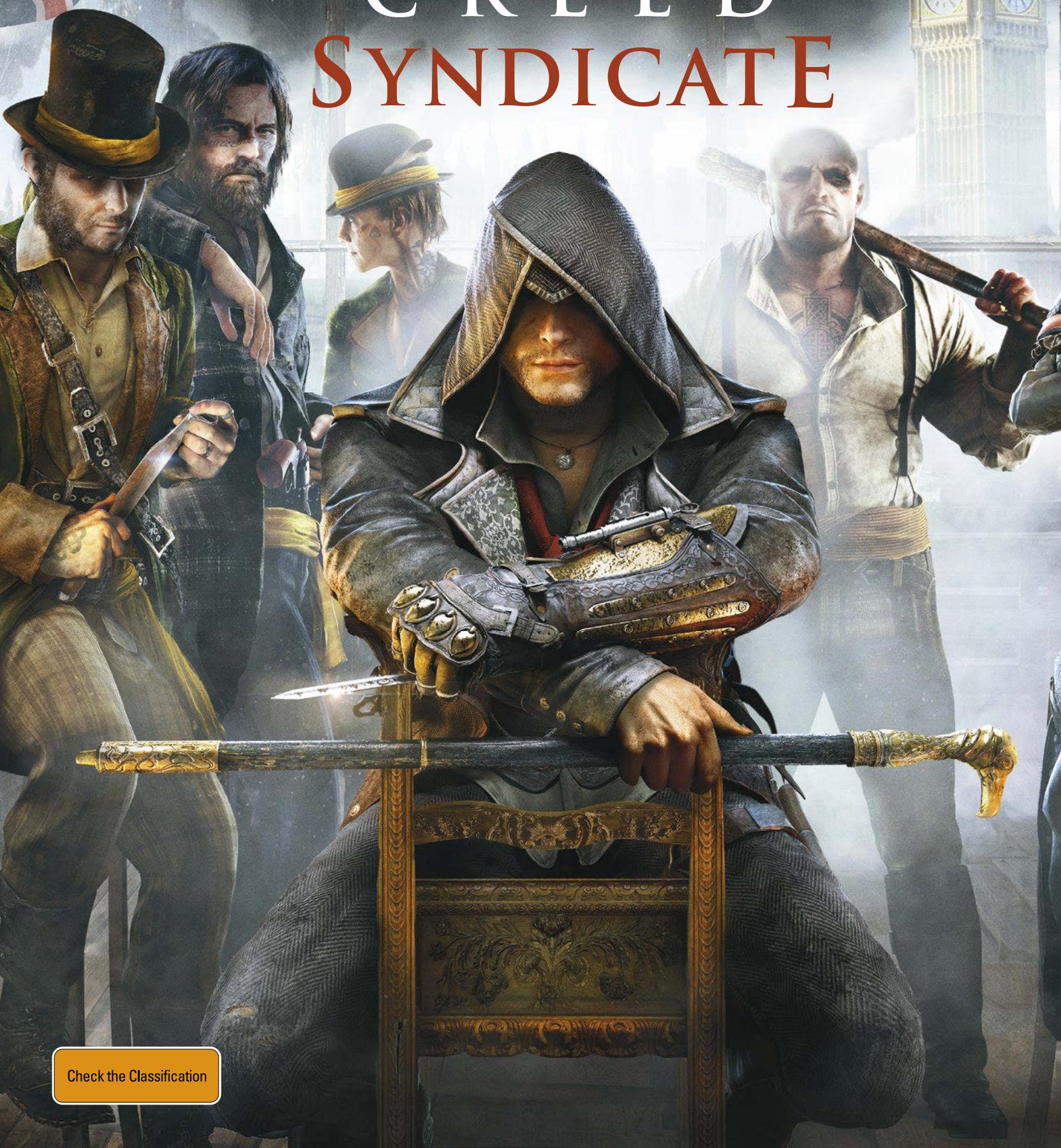
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GAMES OF THE FUTURE SPECIAL

12 | HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
Hunting robot dinosaurs

» E3 2015 has been one of the most exciting ever, with a huge range of new IPs, much anticipated sequels and new technologies on display. More than any other E3 in memory, 2015 has proved that ideas are still alive and well in the industry, with titles that look set to redefine franchises or simply start new trends in gaming. Paired with this we have the dawn of affordable, meaningful VR with Morpheus, Oculus and HoloLens, new display formats and paradigms, new methods of control and more. Be excited. The future looks grand.

DANIEL WILKS

SLEEPY EDITOR



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GAMES OF THE FUTURE

THE MOST EXCITING UPCOMING
GAMES ALL IN ONE PLACE!

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FALLOUT 4

DANIEL WILKS SETS ABOUT TO
MAKE A BRAVE NEW WORLD

The Fallout games have all had narratives revolving around a single character reshaping the world after the catastrophic war that all but destroyed humanity and rendered the Earth a radioactive wasteland. The original Fallout saw the Vault Dweller from Vault 13 trying to retrieve a Water Chip to save his vault but eventually having to foil a plot to release a mutagen that would transform any effected survivors into Super Mutants. Fallout 2 saw The Chosen One try to find a Garden of Eden Creation Kit (GECK) to save Arroyo. Fallout 3 had the Vault Dweller of Vault 101 tracking down their father and eventually trying to complete plans to purify the waters of the Potomac (or poison the water to kill all mutations) and Fallout: New Vegas finds "The Courier" having to decide the fate of the Hoover Dam and Las Vegas. While we don't know any real plot details for Fallout 4 at the moment, what we do know is that the game will continue this tradition of seeing the main character reshape the world, only this time this reshaping will be both narrative and mechanical.

For the first time in the series, players will be literally capable of reforming the world around them thanks to a robust new crafting system that, although the developers have gone to great lengths to explain is in no way a compulsory part of the Fallout 4 experience, looks like to will form a deep and hugely satisfying part of the new game. As a scavenger of the wasteland, players will be able to break down objects to their component parts and then use those resources to build all manner of things ranging from accommodation through to generators, automated sentry guns, gardens and more. As long as the player has enough materials they can build nearly anything they could want, and rather than player built towns simply being a visual modification to the game, they will also effect the population of the wasteland. The bigger and better equipped the town the more people will move there, sometimes opening up businesses or shops, many of which sell rare gear. Set up more than one thriving town and the player can



PLATFORM: Xbone, PS4, PC /

CATEGORY: RPG /

DEVELOPER: Bethesda Game Studios /

PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks /

DUE: November 10



even set up trade caravans running between them to boost the economy and start raking in the bottle caps.

To supplement buildings, players will also need to construct amenities like power generators, lighting and automated sentries, as some survivors are more inclined to raid player settlements than they are to move into them. It hasn't been clearly stated as yet but it appears that the more successful a settlement becomes the more likely it is to be raided, giving a price to progress. The way built technology will work in Fallout 4 is similar to the way the building of structures works, with modular pieces slotting together to create larger, more complex objects. In the case of lights, sentries and the like, the power generator serves as the hub of all technology for both power and control. Anything requiring power needs to be connected to a generator, and depending on the technology the control terminal in the generator will allow players to modify aspects of the attached technology, such as the intensity and colour of light,

display patterns and the like. The gameplay reveal for Fallout 4 showed multiple kinds of defensive weapons being placed and used around a settlement like some kind of brutal tower defence game – we won't be surprised if some modders make that style of gameplay a reality.

This idea of crafting and modification extends to the player's armour and weapons. There will be around 50 base gun types with multiple parts that can be swapped in and out to modify the attributes of the base unit. By changing these modifiable aspects of weapons – adding longer or shorter barrels, different shoulder stocks or grips, longer or specialised magazines, players will be able to, according to the developers, create over 700 different weapons with which they can explore the dangers of the wasteland. In many ways, powered armour in Fallout 4 will be treated more like a vehicle than a form of defence, with players being able to modify different modular parts affecting the defensive and movement capabilities of the armour as well as being able to add things like jetpacks to allow for boosted jumps. Hopefully some of these modifications – like the aforementioned jetpack will be available for lighter armours as well, as not everyone wants

to get about the wasteland looking like an angry low rent Cyberman.

Plot wise there hasn't been a great deal of information released as yet, but what has been released is certainly intriguing. The player, either male or female is the only survivor of their Vault – 111 in this case – and rather than being born there, they are survivors from the actual war. Players will be able to experience what life was like before the bombs dropped, in the quaintly retro-futuristic year of 2077 with its 1950s civility and creepy cephalopod style robotic butlers before the inevitable happens and the main character's family must make a mad dash to the Vault for safety. What we do know is that they don't make it to the Vault in time and a bomb drops nearby. 200 years later the character emerges blinking from Vault 111, all but unchanged and with no idea that such a length of time has elapsed. Nothing has been revealed about the workings of Vault 111 and the events leading up to the Vault Dweller leaving

its safe, if lonely confines, but given the fact that the Vaults all seem to have been based around scientific or psychological experiments we wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that Vault 111 was involved with either cloning or cryogenic research.

The player's journey will take them through the wasteland and the ruined city of Boston. What they will do there remains to be seen, but given the fact that Iron Brotherhood powered armour is featured strongly in promo art and power armour modification is a key component of the crafting system, we can assume that the character will run into the Brotherhood and most probably the Enclave and other less powerful factions. The conversation system has been redesigned to be more dynamic, with more dialogue choices and the ability to break from conversation at any time, a godsend for anyone who doesn't want to hear the same snippet of conversation over again if they click the wrong button, or for someone who has been attacked while they're locked into a conversation. As with previous games, some NPCs will join the Vault Dweller in their mission. We haven't been introduced to any of them as yet, but we're definitely looking forward to finding out what they, and the world of Fallout 4, are like in coming months. ■

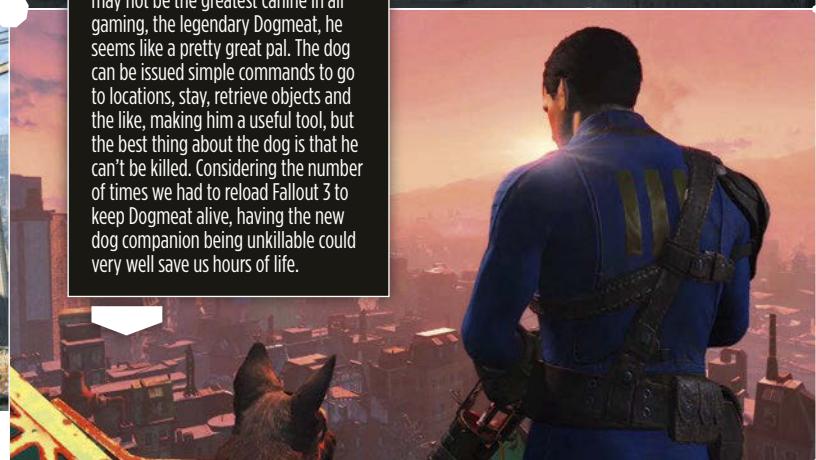
■ 1950S CIVILITY AND CREEPY CEPHALOPOD STYLE ROBOTIC BUTLERS ■





GOOD BOY

The Vault Dweller has the opportunity to befriend a dog companion early in *Fallout 4*, and although this dog may not be the greatest canine in all gaming, the legendary Dogmeat, he seems like a pretty great pal. The dog can be issued simple commands to go to locations, stay, retrieve objects and the like, making him a useful tool, but the best thing about the dog is that he can't be killed. Considering the number of times we had to reload *Fallout 3* to keep Dogmeat alive, having the new dog companion being unkillable could very well save us hours of life.



HORIZON ZERO DAWN

ANDREW WHITEHEAD WALKS THE ROBO-DINOSAUR (BOOM BOOM SHAKA-LAKALAKA BOOM)

Having worked on five Killzone games in a row the team at Guerrilla Games were understandably hungry for something new to sink their teeth into. But even for an experienced studio in need of a change their new venture, Horizon Zero Dawn, seems like an incredibly big task to take on.

Gone are the linear paths and dark, gritty graphics from their signature sci-fi shooter series, Horizon is an open-world action RPG set in what has been dubbed a 'post-post-apocalyptic' world filled with

lush green forests, wide open spaces and deadly, murderous robot monsters.

The game centres on a hunter named Aloy as she hunts these animal-like machines in an effort to help keep her tribe alive. The story details have been intentionally left vague for now, as the team wants the gaming community to speculate a bit more before revealing concrete details.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD >>

"One thing that was critically important to us is we didn't

want to announce [a new] game without showing the gameplay," said senior producer Mark Norris, "we feel like that's incredibly important. We wanted to show you that Horizon is a completely seamless open-world action RPG."

The RPG elements in question weren't on show just yet, but it's easy to foresee Aloy growing and gaining new abilities as the game progresses. Another element spoken about but that is yet to be fully shown off is how



PLATFORM: PlayStation 4 /
CATEGORY: Action role-playing /
DEVELOPER: Guerrilla Games / PUBLISHER:
Sony Computer Entertainment / DUE: 2016

large the game world is but Norris pointed out that the game follows the mantra of many modern open-world games - if you can see it you can explore it.

What was on show however was the mix of stealth and tactical combat you'll be using in Horizon to survive against your robotic attackers. At the start of my live demo Aloy was perched up on a rocky ledge and surveying an open field filled with the monstrous machines before quickly moving down to the ground below and hiding among the foliage. It was clear that these beasts had something she needed.

Her quiet approach was foiled however by a dinosaur-like robot called a Watcher that scanned the bushes she was currently using as cover. It began to wail loudly, calling in reinforcements, which forced Aloy to leap out and kill the machine instantly with her imposing scrap metal spear before resuming her stealthy approach towards the herd.

"There's a tactical and strategic nature to the combat because you a primitive warrior and you will find yourself up

against overwhelming odds constantly," explained Norris. "You will face [large numbers] and heavily armed enemies, so you'll need to use stealth and traps to get an advantage on the battlefield."

BE VERY, VERY QUIET >> Bow drawn Aloy approached the robotic herd that appeared to be grazing when suddenly a flock of terrified birds made way for two massive mechanical monsters that were thankfully just passing through. With that threat avoided Aloy drew her bow and fired at one of her targets, shooting it in the back which held a number of big canisters filled with liquid. Startled, the robots fled as she kept firing, trying to dislodge more containers. For what purpose? I couldn't get an answer, but such is the nature of pre-release demos.

Clearly drawn to the commotion, one of the giant robots that passed through before returned, knocking down trees and overturning boulders as it charged toward Aloy while firing with its back-mounted cannons.

Opening the weapon-wheel I could see a variety of ammo types that will be at your disposal. Switching from the regular arrows to an electric one Aloy sprinted towards the monster and slid beneath it, shooting it in the belly and stunning it. This battle

■ IF GUERRILLA KNOWS HOW TO DO ONE THING IT'S HOW TO PUSH A SONY CONSOLE TO ITS LIMITS ■

continued as Aloy dodged the beast's charges and tail swings, shooting it with more electrified arrows when she found an opening.

Hitting it on the side and stunning it once more she then switched to explosive tipped arrows, shooting one of the monster's cannons off before rushing over and picking it up for herself. Getting only a few shots off Aloy clearly damaged her target but has to ditch the big guns so as to dodge yet another charging attack.

Opening the weapon wheel again and switching to a sort of mini-harpoon gun Aloy shot the creature with a spike tied to a rope. She then fired the other end into the ground, effectively creating a way to tether the monster to one spot. A few more shots from the rope gun and the beast was immobilised, falling hard to the ground.

A final explosive shot to an exposed weak spot critically damages the monster and with her giant metal spear Aloy slays the beast, stabbing it in the head. Exhausted she wanders off to a nearby cliff

edge and surveys a valley of decaying skyscrapers and city streets. Suddenly she turns around as she's confronted by a massive mechanical bird monster. And then it was over.

The demo was largely the same one shown off to the public already but I can attest to watching a member of Guerrilla Games play it live and in front of me on a PlayStation 4. So basically, yes, Horizon really does look as great as you've seen - but really if Guerrilla knows how to do one thing it's how to push a Sony console to its limits.

ALLO ALLO ALOY >> One stand out feature of the game was Aloy herself. Aside from looking great both technically and artistically her sarcasm and occasional quips kept the tone light when things were getting crazy.

"You can see her personality [in what we're showing]," said Norris. "You can see she's a bit snarky and a bit sarcastic. Jo^o Gonzalez is our lead writer and he was the lead writer on Fallout: New Vegas, and you can see his style has a little bit of sarcasm to it."

Aloy had a very Spider-Man like quality to her; she was confident and cocky at times but also capable of coming across sincere and genuinely emotional.

"She's not all snark," said Norris "I mean as you can

A HUNTER'S REMORSE

Early in the gameplay demo Horizon's protagonist Aloy takes down a machine called a Watcher before it could call out for help, which to my surprise visibly upset her.

"That's a big part of her personality," explains senior producer Mark Norris. "There's a story reason that explains her connection to the machines."

But of course it's a story reason that "we aren't talking about yet".



HORIZON
ZERO DAWN™



We can only hope Aloy has mysterious robo-dino taming powers a la Chris Pratt

see when she takes down the Watcher she has a moment where she's almost frustrated, sort of upset she had to take it down. And that's a big part of her personality, there's a story reason that explains her connection to the machines."

And speaking of the machines one thing I noticed during my demo was how the smaller ones that Aloy was hunting didn't seem to fear the giant monsters that wandered through the field. Each of the beasts seen was a bi-pedal dinosaur-like creature so you'd assume there'd be a natural order of hunters and hunted.

"So we're not really ready to talk too much about [the ecology]," said Norris. "There's a big story about why the machines are here and their relationship with the [humans]. We'd rather have the

community speculate for a while before we get into it in depth."

NEW DIRECTION >> As mentioned before, making the leap from Killzone to Horizon in just a few years is impressive. The world, the art style, and the gameplay – they're all wildly different than what the studio has done in the past. So it makes sense that a number of new hires have had previous experience working with open-world games.

"I'm newer to the company and I came from making open world games previously," said Norris. "But it certainly is a huge transition for the studio and the [Killzone] engine going from what was essentially a first-person corridor shooter to a third-person open world."

"It brings in new streaming systems, all sorts of memory

allocation issues, it brings in questions of fidelity of the art and those are things we've had to struggle with but we're really happy with the result."

What makes this massive change possible is the team's commitment to proving they can be more than a Killzone factory.

"One of the things that I've found really cool working at Guerrilla Games is a number of people have been there for over a decade," said Norris. "I mean there are people, not just a few but a lot, who have been there since the original Killzone and they were over the moon excited for this."

MECHA-MONSTER HUNTER

>> Much like when the original Killzone was shown on the PlayStation 2, Horizon Zero Dawn has that feeling of being

ARROW TO THE ROBOTIC KNEE

The return to primitive hunting methods means players will rely on their trusty bow and arrow but with a post-apocalyptic twist.

"These aren't just regular arrows, they use the machines," explains senior producer Mark Norris. "So the armour piercing arrow is actually tipped with a piece of the machines to slice through their steel plates."

Weapon and ammo crafting using spare robot parts? Nothing is confirmed, but it's an assumption I'm willing to make.

something big for Sony. It's more than just a good-looking game; it feels like a new franchise is taking root here.

There are a lot of questions that remain and the only real downer is that we're probably going to have to wait quite a while before they're answered. But from what little we know, it's clear Zero Dawn is going to be huge. Like, dinosaur huge. **KK**

THE DEADLY TOWER OF MONSTERS

HEIDI KEMPS KNOWS WHAT GOES UP MUST COME DOWN

ACE Team is one of those indie devs whose next project you never really see coming. After first-person brawler Zeno Clash, the Santiago-based team has done the strange pinball/tower defense hybrid Rock of Ages and the surreal, Chilean mythology inspired action/RPG game Abyss Odyssey. Their next title, The Deadly Tower of Monsters, might be their most "mainstream" yet... but even that's a bit of a stretch.

From the game's promo art, it's easy to see the inspiration for Deadly Tower of Monsters: schlocky Hollywood sci-fi B-movies of the 50s and 60s. It certainly wouldn't be the first time a game has used retro-cinematic imagery to effect. And it certainly wouldn't be the first game where you're supposed to be playing through a movie, as you are here. But it is the first game where the movie you're playing is being commented on by the fictional "director" in a DVD-style commentary track as you play.

The core plot of the game centers around the spacefaring adventures of handsome space hero Dick Starspeed, interstellar bombshell Scarlet Nova, and their robot companion Robot as they are marooned on the planet

Gravoria. Gravoria is filled with all manner of strange creatures, most of which know only violence. In order to escape from these deadly environments, they're going to have to fight their way to the top of... **The Deadly Tower of Monsters!** As they embark on their quest, they are beset upon by man-apes, bloodthirsty aliens, and prehistoric terrors that appear to be clumsily composed stop-motion animatronics.

■■■ NEVERMIND ALL THE VISIBLE SUSPENSION STRINGS AND TOY-LOOKING UFOS ■■■

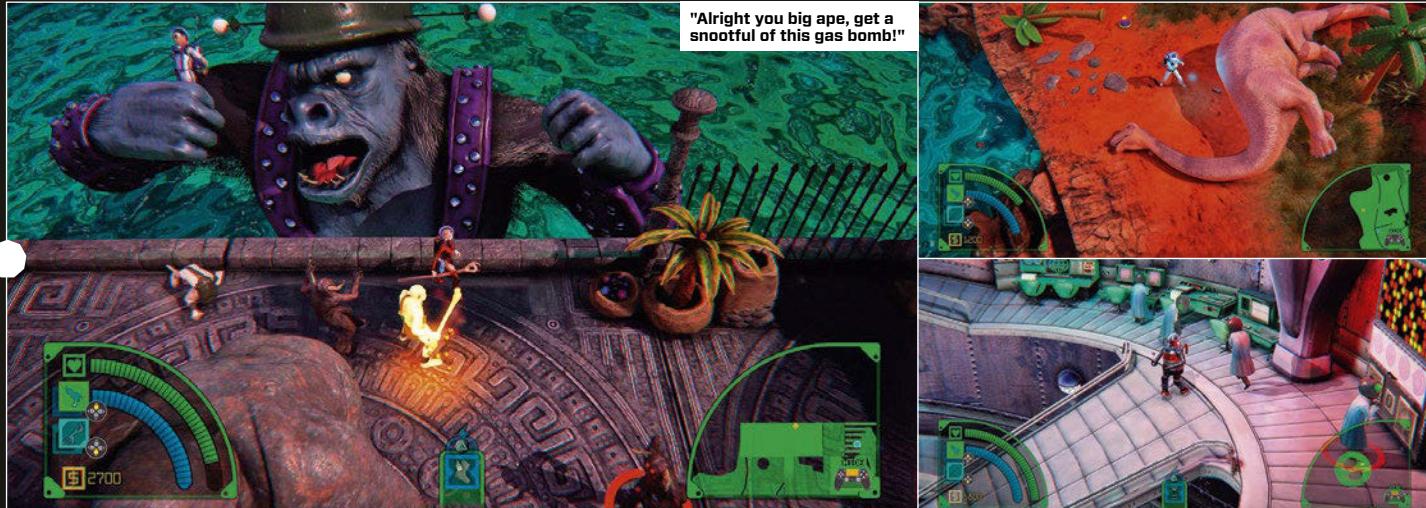
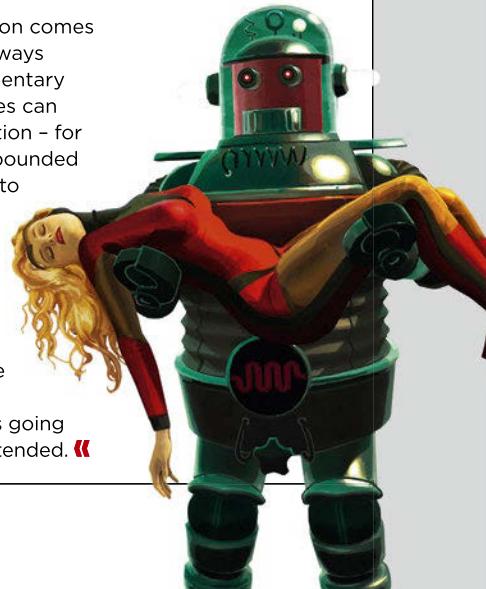
Yet that's only a part of the game's fiction. You see, the Deadly Tower of Monsters is the unsung masterpiece of auteur director Dan Smith, and for this special edition re-release after all this time, he's providing a commentary track elaborating on his screaming, unrecognized genius. Nevermind all the visible suspension strings... and toy-looking UFOs... and the fact that those killer monkeys are clearly guys in bad makeup - this was a film that

was so ahead of its time, only modern audiences can truly appreciate its brilliance. (Probably ironically, but shhh - let's not tell him that.)

The game consists of both top-down and semi-sidescrolling stages, where you jump, roll, and fight your way to freedom. Armed with only your trusty space blaster and your melee combat skills, you must fell the foes that beset you and maneuver through the tower. It doesn't necessarily have to be a straight climb up, either - you can do a (bungee-cord-propelled) freefall off of the tower to access lower levels again.

The elaborate meta-fiction comes to life in many interesting ways as you play, and the commentary that director Smith provides can change based on the situation - for example, if you're getting pounded by foes, he might launch into an anecdote about how the budget prevented him from getting proper safety gear for his lead actor. It's a fun - and funny - concept for an action game, and if the full release is even half as enjoyable as the demo we played, this is going to be a blast - pun semi-intended. ■■■

PLATFORM: PS4/PC / CATEGORY: Action /
DEVELOPER: ACE Team / PUBLISHER: Atlus / DUE: FALL 2015



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TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

HEIDI KEMPS MAKES LOVE, NOT WAAAGH!



PLATFORM: PC / CATEGORY: Strategy /
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly /
PUBLISHER: Sega / DUE: TBA 2016

Some things seem like such a foregone conclusion that you're honestly shocked that it took so long for them to happen. When Creative Assembly announced earlier this year that they were going to be creating a Total War title based on Games Workshop's world-beloved line of Warhammer fantasy figurines and tabletop games, the reaction was one of expected exuberance, but also relief that the seemingly inevitable had finally come to pass.

I, too, was curious on how the match made in heaven was finally put together. Was it the death of THQ – and the subsequent acquisition of many of their assets by Sega – that allowed things to come to fruition? "Actually," says Lead Writer Andy Hall, "THQ never had the Warhammer license – they only had the Warhammer 40,000 license."

The real origins of the title go back to 2012, when Hall was working on the "other side of the fence" at Games Workshop. "I was in the licensing team at the time. Both teams worked really hard... GW wanted a Total War version of Warhammer, and the Total War guys really wanted Warhammer. The stars eventually aligned, basically." The two companies had been engaged in discussions as far back as a decade prior, he went on to reveal.

The Total War series is known for many things: deep, strategic campaigns, and grand-scale real-time battles. The Warhammer team at Creative Assembly is dedicated to bringing all of these to Total War Warhammer, but also aims to create a title that's very distinct from the history-based games the company

is best known for. After all, you certainly didn't see flying gryphons and orc armies in ancient Rome. But now that they have access to a universe where these things are a given – well, it would be silly to not use them, and use them in a big way. Literally, in some cases.

One thing was very clear when we went to see Total War: Warhammer at E3: the game is still in the very early stages of development. Much of what we were shown was simply concept art. However, the snippets of gameplay demos that we did see were nothing short of astonishing. If the actual gameplay can meet the graphical benchmarks of the non-playable, pre-alpha demo that Creative Assembly showcased behind closed doors, then we are in for a treat with the final game.

Within each of the armies featured – the Empire, led by Karl Franz, and the greenskins, led by Grimgor Ironhide – was a staggering variety of different troop types: orc shaman spellcasters, cavalry with wolf mounts, steam tanks, and so much more. An important addition to Total War Warhammer is how different the varied factions are. In the historical Total War titles, different groups had a few distinct advantages and disadvantages. This time around, however, the different factions might not even belong to the same races. Different factions will offer drastically different playstyles, says Creative Assembly, allowing for more dynamic battles than ever before. Seeing these hordes of soldiers clash with each other in ways you could only dream of previously is a delight. And as war wages you can zoom in as you please to see the detail on each unit, watching gleefully as they execute their foes without mercy.





MY IMMORTAL

While your average on-the-ground greenskin is fairly expendable, the biggest names in Warhammer lore will not be able to be killed, effectively making them immortal. The big names – your Karl Franzes and your Grimgor Ironhides – can only be injured. Your generals, however, are considerably more vulnerable, so don't expect them to escape a fierce skirmish with merely a flesh wound.

■ A GIANT FOOT
CAME DOWN FROM
THE HEAVENS, MONTY
PYTHON-STYLE, TO CRUSH
AN ENTIRE UNIT ■



Slap an indecipherable logo on this screen
and voila: instant death metal album cover

Among the new gameplay features being introduced are battlefield-razing magical spells, flying units, and giant-sized units. These have never been seen in a Total War title before, and their debut was striking. At one point on our demo, a spell was cast and a giant foot came down from the heavens, Monty Python-style, to crush an entire unit. Soon after, Karl Franz, mounted on his majestic gryphon, swooped down from the heavens to tear apart a group of ground units. Meanwhile, the greenskins were fighting elsewhere with forest goblin troops mounted atop a giant spider, accompanied by giants that could take down a slew of troops with a single attack.

What we were shown was only a glimpse of everything that will be in the final product. "Trying to get a majority these troop types in – and doing them justice – was difficult," notes Hall. "Warhammer is a game that's thirty years old. Over the years, it's constantly grown and developed. Each of these races has a whole gamut of miniatures... but to see

a miniature like Karl Franz come to life in a way I could have only ever imagined before was fantastic."

A new addition to the game system is "Heroes," who act similarly to the Agents of previous Total War titles. Heroes can be brought into combat and are highly customizable: as they fight and grow, you can pick out skills and traits (from, as Andy Hall says "almost thirty levels of skills") to your liking in a way that's completely new to the series. Be careful, however – if you send a hero into combat, there's always the possibility that they won't make it back.

Was it tough to get all these new additions to work in an engine that's never seen them before? "With each new version of Total War, the engine gets iterated more and more," says Hall. "We've got a larger team now... and that's one of the reasons we can do Total War Warhammer at this time. Earlier, development of this title would have interfered with our traditional history-based games. Now, we're in a place where we can have two separate teams. Since we've got the dedicated team, we



can really tweak the engine to get to a place where we can have things like dynamic air-to-air, air-to-ground combat, giant spiders, and all these other wonderful monsters that are walking around."

But what of the campaign mode to tie all of these epic fights together? Details are still sparse, but Creative Assembly promises that they will soon reveal more about how the game's campaign works. Unfortunately, you're going to have a wait a while yet for the game, as the current release date is sometime in 2016 – but that'll just make all those human soldiers your Arachnarok eats when the time comes taste all the sweeter. ■

XCOM 2

I WANT TO BELIEVE ALIENS ARE REAL AND I HOPE TO SHOOT ONE IN THE HEAD, WRITES ANDREW WHITEHEAD

So it turns out we lost. That's how XCOM 2 sees the world anyway. All that base building and money grubbing in the first game was for nothing - the humans were taken over by the alien invaders and now are forced to cheer for our prison wardens or risk being annihilated.

"A lot of our players lost the first time they played XCOM, or even the first few times," said Garth DeAngelis, senior producer of XCOM 2. "So we said 'what if in our lore, they failed' and we thought that would lead to an interesting premise."

Because the XCOMs are no longer a big budget government operation they've lost their huge underground base. Instead they're airborne, staying mobile and flying around the world in an effort to start a revolution.

The base building you know from the first game is still here, but the details of how it will work and where you'll get your funding wasn't something the team at Firaxis are ready to talk about just yet.

What was on show was the same turn-based alien hunting you've come to know and love but with a small twist to reflect the new position the XCOMs find themselves in.

"Since the tables have turned, and the aliens don't know that XCOM is reforming, you can work from the shadows and get the jump on them and create ambushes," said DeAngelis.

Other changes in combat see players now being able to carry fallen comrades off the battlefield - some may live to fight again, others won't be so lucky, but either way you'll get their gear back. It may be callous, but times are tough.

THE MAPS ARE NOW PROCEDURALLY GENERATED, SO NO TWO GAMES WILL BE THE SAME //

Five new classes are also coming to XCOM 2, with two being shown off during my demo. The first was the Ranger, an agile fast-moving stealth killer who can get up close and use blades capable of inflicting serious damage.

The other new recruit was the Specialist who was able to use a drone-like device called a Gremlin to fly around the map before hacking

a mounted turret and turning it against the aliens.

Seeing that made me think about later in the game if it would be possible to hack other things like an alien cyborg? "If it's robotic based than you can try and hack them," was the cryptic answer DeAngelis gave me.

Visually the game looks fantastic with the new dynamic lighting, changing time of day and shifting weather all working together to create a bleak yet beautiful world to wreak havoc in.

In addition to the graphic upgrades the maps themselves are now procedurally generated, meaning no two games will be the same. There are still some handcrafted elements to each map, but there are also a lot of random pieces to keep the game interesting.

And better yet the same procedural map system will be used in multiplayer too so be prepared to lose a lot of sleep when XCOM 2 lands later this year. //

PLATFORM: PC / CATEGORY: Turn-based strategy / DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games / PUBLISHER: 2K Games / DUE: NOVEMBER 2015





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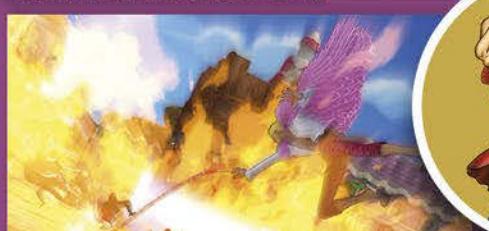


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DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

ANDREW WHITEHEAD WOULD CUT OFF HIS OWN ARM RIGHT NOW IF CYBERNETICS WERE THIS COOL

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: First-person shooter / DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal / PUBLISHER: Square Enix / DUE: Early 2016

After exceeding expectations with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, Eidos has created some big shoes to fill. But it's pretty obvious that the developer is more than on the right track with its return to the world of cyberpunk shooting in *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*.

Taking place in 2029, two years after *Human Revolution*, this new outing sees returning hero Adam Jensen living in a world that no longer trusts augmented people and has shifted them all to transhuman ghettos.

Now working for an Interpol agency called Task Force 29, Jensen must deal with augmented-human terror cells while also pursuing his more personal agenda of bringing down the Illuminati, which he suspects is in control of his new employer. To complicate matters Jensen also finds himself drawn to helping an underground hacking group called the Juggernaut Collective who is hell-bent on exposing government and corporate corruption.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE >>

How the story unfolds is, like the previous games, all up to you. During the live demo we were shown a mission that involved tracking down a terrorist leader who could be reasoned with if the player knew what to say. Sadly our demo guide went a bit trigger-happy earlier on, killing this man's loyal soldiers and thoroughly pissing him off.

"We refer to these as social boss fights," said executive audio director Steve Szczepkowski. "So had the player gone stealth and not killed people it would have played out a lot differently."

Basically it's not just about dialogue choices, it's also about what you do between these big conversations that will affect how the world sees you. But it should also be noted that there's no wrong way to play *Mankind Divided*, so if you're happy to deal with the consequences you can keep your gun drawn at all times.

"We will never punish any play-style," said Szczepkowski. "If anything this is a more balanced game than *Human Revolution*. We made sure to add more non-lethal approaches as we felt that was a bit lacking [in the last game]."

KILLING ME SOFTLY >> A new way for Adam to deal with enemies is using his Gun Arm that turns his left cybernetic arm into a Swiss army knife of the future. On display during the demo were the non-lethal Tesla mode that discharged and knocked out up to four targets plus a concussive blast that sent enemies flying into walls and off ledges.

Better than that though was the deadly blade launcher that impaled an enemy and stuck them to a wall while another firing mode shot a similar blade into a wall that then detonated, spraying enemies in shrapnel that were hiding behind cover. This is all just icing on the cake really. There wasn't a whole lot that needed fixing since the last game, especially since the Wii U re-release slightly reworked those broken boss fights. So really all we can do now is sit and wait for *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* to show up sometime early next year. ■

WE WILL NEVER PUNISH ANY PLAY-STYLE ... THIS IS A MORE BALANCED GAME THAN HUMAN REVOLUTION

GO GO KILLER GADGET

Adam Jensen has so many toys it's hard to know where to start. A few on show during my demo included the Titan Shield that gives you a black polygonal armour that can stop bullets, Focus to slow down time and the Icarus Dash which lets you move and climb faster – a handy skill to have with *Mankind Divided*'s increased vertical level design.



Good thing he's got a channel surfing aug installed



"Papers, please. Duration of stay?"



SUPER DUNGEON BROS

HEIDI KEMPS FIGHTS FOR THE KISS ARMY

What do you get when you combine a love of killing monsters, rock-n-roll, and the sort of camaraderie only a four-player co-op play extravaganza can inspire? You get Super Dungeon Bros, an Xbox One, Windows 10, and PS4 indie bro-op isometric dungeon crawler by Wired Productions.

It's easy to see the type of game you're getting into from the character selection screen: you pick one of four different character archetypes, but they're not divided by class – rather, they're separated by personalities and named after one of four different rock legends (Axl, Ozzie, Freddie, and Lars). Who you pick affects the way your character interacts when communicating with the others on the field. After choosing your bro, you pick your weapon. Weapons also fall into four classes: swords, bows, hammers, and wands. The instrument of destruction you choose (which will more than likely have a music pun for a name) has a drastic effect on how you play the game.

Have you and up to three of your bestest bros got your characters and gear ready? Good, because now it's time to get down to business – thrashing through hordes of the undead in the realm of Rokheim.

The dungeons are procedurally generated, so you'll never quite know what to expect: pendulous swinging axes of doom, swarms of Bonie foes, shifting platforms with tricky jumps... that's just a taster of what these dark realms have in store. Knowing your weapon is key, since each weapon type is distinctly different in terms of range and moves available. This isn't every man for himself, either – since lives are shared as a group,

IN OUR DEMO SESSION, WE FOUGHT A FEARSOME GHOST BOSS NAMED DUKE SPOOKEM

you'll need to team up whenever possible. Skills like Bro Stacking and the Bro Throw help your crew reach difficult areas and secure maximum loot-collecting potential. When the going gets really rough, a flick of the left trigger activates your limited-use Bro Move. Bro Moves vary by weapon and power up substantially by getting your other bros to join in.

Beating up wimpy enemies for loot gets old after a while, but



Super Dungeon Bros ups the ante with some seriously metal, big bad bosses. These guys are no one-hit-wonders: they're resilient, they have unique weaknesses, and they'll thrash you up hard with devastating attacks if you aren't on your toes. In our demo session, we fought a fearsome ghost boss named Duke Spookem, who had an absolutely ferocious AOE attack that rained damage all over the field. In order to take him down, we had to work as a team to climb up to higher platforms on the side, where we could wail on his weak points.

Of course, a game like this isn't meant to be a solo act. If you can't buddy up with other bros locally, you have the option of doing so online. You won't be restricted by platform, either – Super Dungeon Bros offers cross-platform adventuring. Xbox One players will have the opportunity to rock out with their PC pals, while PC owners can also go on tour with the PS4 crew.

Super Dungeon Bros is shaping up nicely – it's funny, it's colorful, it's accessible, and it's a great time with a full band to play with. Look forward to becoming a legend of rock later this year. «



PLATFORM: Xbone, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: Dungeon Crawler / DEVELOPER: React Games / PUBLISHER: Wired Productions / DUE: 2015



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MAD MAX

ONE DAY ANDREW WHITEHEAD HOPES TO BE AN EXPERT IN HUMAN HARPOONING

Not tied to the recent or previous films, Avalanche Studios have forged their own path with *Mad Max*. It's a familiar starting point though - Max's car is stolen by a group of bandits leading him on a journey of revenge and auto repair.

Following Max on his journey is Chumbucket, a mutant mechanic whose sole desire is to create the perfect vehicle - the *Magnum Opus*. That mission aside, Chumbucket's in-game purpose is to repair your car while you're out exploring the wasteland. And believe me, you will need him. A lot.

My demo began near an old outpost where I found a new engine for my cobbled together ride. After installing it I headed towards a waypoint that would lead me to a convoy holding scrap metal (the game's currency) needed for my next upgrade.

The expansive vistas look equally brilliant and barren as I drove across the vast desert and my constantly recharging boost meant I could cover large distances fairly quickly, though I would often launch off a cliff face and slam into the rocks below. There's a slight twinge of rubber-banding going on that ensured I'd never accidentally flip my car onto its

roof and have to hitchhike home.

After a while I spotted my targets and let my presence be known with an unceremonious boost into the side of one of their cars. This battle with the convoy was where things really started to take off. Ramming my opponents off the road proved too tricky so instead I pulled out my harpoon and threw it, ripping some poor bastard out of his car. I then found myself between two opposing

CHUMBUCKET'S PURPOSE IS TO REPAIR YOUR CAR, AND BELIEVE ME, YOU'LL NEED HIM

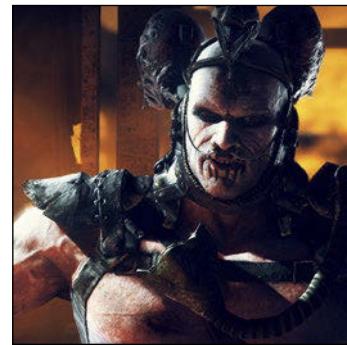
vehicles, but quickly switched to my car's flamethrower, which burned up my precious fuel, but thankfully torched my attackers.

After a few more explosions and shotgun blasts the convoy was brought to a halt. Now on foot I started cracking a few heads open in hand-to-hand combat that had a very *Arkham* feel to it with its counters and combos. Except a lot more brutal, obviously.

I searched around the wrecks while my faithful mechanic was busy fixing my ride, when I found a hood ornament that I quickly attached to my car giving it a small stat boost.

I should have known going in but the amount of options thrown at you for vehicular customisation and high-speed combat did surprise me and will ultimately be the thing that sets *Mad Max* apart from the sea of open world action games.

There's still a lot that remains to be seen about the game, but the fundamentals for another surprise hit like *Shadow of Mordor* feel like they might be here. It looks and sounds great, it has the vehicular combat nailed down and thankfully it gets to capitalise on the success of the brilliant *Fury Road* without being a slave to anyone else's vision. Oh and yes, Max sounds Australian. I mean it's in that "make him sound EXTRA Australian" kind of way. But let's just enjoy that little victory all the same. ■



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: Open world action-adventure / DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios / PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment / DUE: September 2, 2015



LOADING HUMAN

LOAD "HEIDI KEMPS", 8,1

Some of the biggest buzz this year has been around the various VR devices coming onto the market, particularly the Oculus Rift and Sony's Morpheus. While there's a lot of speculation about the potential VR has, there still aren't a lot of people talking about actual, specific games for these devices. Indeed, a good chunk of what was shown for the VR devices at E3 this year were still just, in essence, tech demos.

There are folks working on full-fledged VR games, however. One such developer is Untold Games, who have been working hard on a sci-fi adventure title called Loading Human. Conceived as an original first-person adventure game for the new VR platforms, the game has received a fair bit of attention and investment, starting with a successful Kickstarter campaign and, more recently, getting additional funds from Epic and publisher Maximum Games. Having played the game, I can definitely see why this game is getting attention – it could be the first in a fantastic new wave of classic-styled adventures with an entirely new perspective.

I played Loading Human on a Morpheus demo unit, with a head-tracking device and two Playstation

Move controllers. Upon putting on the headset, I was whisked away to what looked like a living space with a view of massive glaciers in the distance. There was no HUD cluttering my screen, just what looked like a normal, lived-in apartment. I could look down and see my hands, represented by the two PS Moves I was holding. The head tracking felt natural and realistic – I didn't feel at all disconnected from what I was seeing.

THE HANDS I SAW ONSCREEN MIMICKED MY OWN HAND MOTION IN A REALISTIC MANNER

The key to interacting with things in the game was using my hands. The hands I saw onscreen mimicked my own hand motion in a realistic manner – though, since I was obviously holding Moves the whole time, interacting with objects was accomplished through button presses. I could pick up almost everything in the environment, and – given that this was meant to

represent someone's living space – I could touch and use all kinds of things lying around. (At one point I picked up a record lying around and put it in a music player, for example.)

Unfortunately, there was little time to dally around. A threat was approaching my base, and I was going to need to put up some shields. I first needed to locate a keycard, which was inside a book. Getting said card involved physically grabbing, opening, and removing it from within the book. Then I had to march over to my control panel, open it up, and grab and flip a switch. As shields covered the windows, the place grew dark – I was going to need a flashlight. Just as I managed to get my flashlight turned on, I heard a noise – and there my demo ended.

I may not have had much time with Loading Human, but what I did experience in it stuck with me. I was intrigued by its interactive world and sci-fi underpinnings, and I left feeling like the promise of VR technology to make immersive experiences was rosy indeed. Though the game's release date is still nebulous, I feel like this game has the potential to be a pioneering title when it launches next year. ■

PLATFORM: PC / CATEGORY: Adventure /
DEVELOPER: Untold Games / PUBLISHER: Massive Games / DUE: TBA



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT

ANDREW WHITEHEAD IS A DIRTY EMPIRE SYMPATHISER

» I'll lay my cards out on the table upfront - I haven't played a Star Wars Battlefront game before this one, so I'm not bringing the same baggage as long-time fans might be. My excitement for this game is derived from a love of the original trilogy and being happy to see DICE work on a new game that may actually be worth playing. Yes, the wounds of Battlefield 4 are still healing for me.

My time with Battlefront was spent on the ice planet Hoth in an epic 20 versus 20 skirmish. As a battalion of Stormtroopers (or Snowtroopers if you want to get tec°ical) it was our job to keep our AT-ATs alive as they marched towards the Rebel base to destroy their shield generators. The Rebels on the other hand were trying to capture and hold Uplink stations to call in Y-Wing bombing runs and take out our giant walkers.

The nature of the battle meant it was the Imperials job to keep our line marching forwards and the Rebels to continue to retreat and hold us off, which in the world of Star Wars feels logical and gave the battle its own narrative of sorts.

Hidden around the map were various upgrades that would

increase the effectiveness of our TIE Fighters, who would show up periodically to perform strafing runs. Naturally the Rebels also relied on their Snowspeeders to do pretty much the same thing.

Pre-set load-outs for the demo featured a variety of tools like Thermal Detonators and personal shield generators, but I relied mostly on the Jump Pack that could

■ **BATTLEFRONT FEELS CONTROLLED AND LESS OPEN TO UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS ■**

launch me in any direction for a few seconds before needing to recharge. Dodging incoming fire or launching out of trenches became key to my survival on the battlefield.

Fighting alongside the massive AT-ATs made me feel small in one sense but also powerful because the beast was on my side. The random chaos of the battle is less than that of Battlefield but there were still a lot of low flying Snowspeeders to avoid and squads of enemies

rushing over the snowy hills of Hoth to deal with.

It's hard to deny the buzz I felt when my team and I would stick together and rush enemy bases, clearing them out and denying them access to their Uplink stations before heading back out to the harsh outdoors and keeping our heads low as we ran through the trenches, trying to ambush incoming Rebels.

Between those moments though there were times when I wished more unexpected crazy events would occur. DICE and Star Wars to me seem like the perfect match but Battlefront feels controlled and less open to unpredictable events. But hey, it's early days yet and the X-factor of the hero characters, such as Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker, is something I'm yet to experience first-hand so I'll reserve judgement for now. In any case I'm definitely keen to jump back in and see why this series has developed such a loyal legion of passionate fans. «



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: Multiplayer shooter / DEVELOPER: DICE / PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts / DUE: November 19, 2015



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BEYOND EYES

HEIDI KEMPS KEEPS HER EYES ON THE PRIZE



PLATFORM: Xbox One/PC/Mac/Linux /
CATEGORY: Adventure/Indie /
DEVELOPER: Tiger & Squid / PUBLISHER: Team 17 /
DUE: LATE 2015

There's a unique means of communication in games that is impossible in nearly any other artistic medium. Games give us the ability to explore and interact with a simulated world, and accomplish and experience things we couldn't within reality. It's a very powerful means of communication, but it's mostly been used for the purposes of escapism: placing you in a fantasy world where you are incredibly powerful and can accomplish things that are impossible in your everyday life. But games also have the potential to give us rawer, down-to-earth experiences that are outside of our own. How does it feel to experience the world as a person with a disability that robs them of a basic sense most of us take for granted? That's the concept of Beyond Eyes, a beautiful independent adventure game from developer Tiger & Squid for the Xbox One and PC.

The game originated back in 2011 as a project by Sherida Halitoe. The prototype that became Beyond Eyes was actually her graduation project for her bachelor's degree in game design. "It used to be my one-person project," she explained to us, "and when I graduated, I wanted to try and make a full game out of it. I worked on it for three and a half years... last year, I was picked up by Team 17. They have an indie program, where they help by giving their resources to indie developers worldwide.

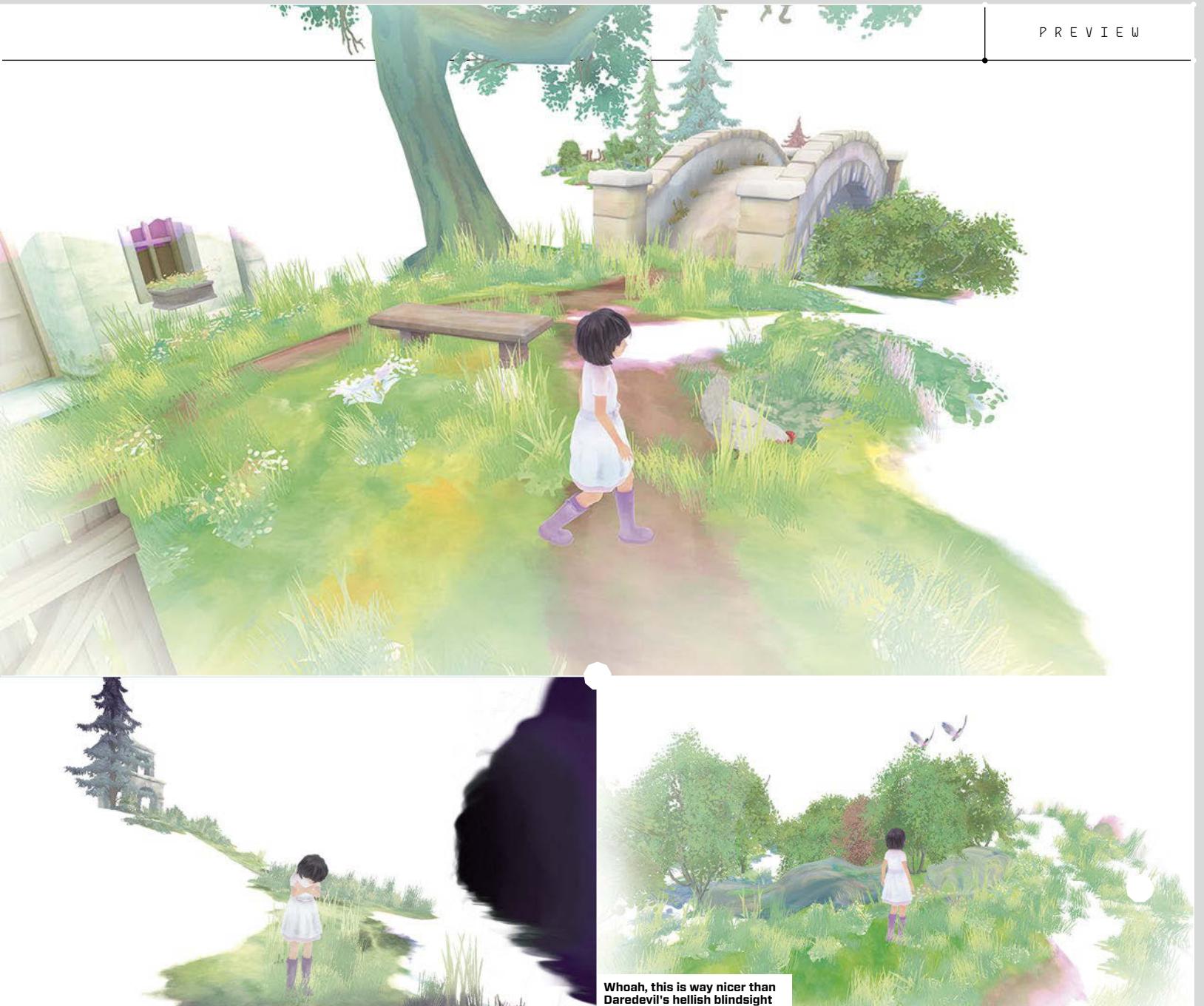
The game's protagonist, Rae, is a 10-year-old girl. When Rae was younger, an accident involving fireworks left her blinded and scarred physically and emotionally. Stripped of

her sight, Rae began to fear the world outside of her comfort zone, avoiding public places and quivering at loud noises. She became socially isolated and withdrawn, preferring to stay in her garden. One day, she meets a new friend – a neighborhood cat that comes by to play. The cat is the closest friend Rae has had in years, but when her friend vanishes one day, Rae must find the courage to finally break her isolation and explore more of the world.

Rae's struggles mirror some of Halitoe's own personal experiences. "When I was Rae's age, I went through similarly tough emotional times, with one of my parents dying," she explains. "It was a very heavy feeling. What I learned is that even though you can't always control what's happening to you in life, you have some measure of control over how you handle it. Life is too short to waste on being scared to do things."

It's an incredible challenge to create an experience that replicates the feel of being unable to see in what is an inherently visual medium, but the way Beyond Eyes goes about it is nothing short of stunning. The visuals have a soft, watercolor-like quality to them that seem to capture a sort of idyllic representation of childhood and familiar things. But these visuals never fill the screen entirely - there is always bright white space surrounding Rae, conveying to the player that she cannot grasp the entirety of her surroundings like a person with perfect sight would. When things like rain create a lot of noise that clogs out other things, the area begins to shrink. If she starts to feel scared or uncomfortable, the warm white surroundings transition into a cold, worrisome black.





"Rae wasn't born blind, but she can 'paint things in' based on how a child would see the world, with bright colors and simple representations of life," explains Halito.

Rae can sense things through touch, feel, and sound, and those are represented in a small area immediately around her. If Rae hears or smells something a ways away, an image will pop up in the distance, representing the thing she has sensed. If she hears birds chirping, for instance, she will see a tree. Rae still has memories from before her accident, and many images she associates with these sounds and scents will pop up when she encounters them. However, her memories aren't always accurate to reality, and her time being sheltered means she still doesn't know a lot of things about the world. In a demo we were shown, Rae hears running water off in the distance. Her memory immediately associates it with a fountain, which appears onscreen in

■ SEEING RAE DERIVE CHILDLIKE GLEE FROM THINGS LIKE CHASING CHICKENS AROUND IS A TREMENDOUS JOY ■

the distance. Getting closer to the running water, however, allows her to smell it, and as you come closer to the source of the sound the visuals transform from a splendid fountain to a smelly drainage pipe.

Rae's animation goes a long way to showcasing her emotional state. When she encounters familiar sounds and scents, she's calm, arms to her sides, walking about normally. If she comes across something that causes discomfort, such as something that's unfamiliar or which feels threatening, she huddles up, wrapping her arms around herself and walking in a much more reserved manner.

Combined with the background color change, it creates a genuine sense of unease – even when encountering things that might seem mundane in other contexts. Sometimes her imagination gets the best of her – if she can't discern how big or numerous something is from a sound, she may exaggerate in her mind to the point where it seems like a much bigger threat than it actually is.

Beyond Eyes is an adventure game, but it's not a linear experience – it's very much guided by the player, and how much they can explore as Rae. It can be emotionally draining to try and push Rae out of her comfort zone, seeing her struggle physically and mentally, but it's often a necessary hardship in order to have her learn more about the world. But seeing Rae derive simple, childlike glee from things like chasing chickens around is a tremendous joy, and the overall experience is one that is both beautiful and deeply affecting. ■

NEED FOR SPEED

ANDREW WHITEHEAD ONCE DRIFTED IN HIS TOYOTA ECHO TO AVOID HITTING AN ECHIDNA

After more than 20 years and just as many games, the Need for Speed series has felt a bit lost of late, so Ghost Games have stepped up and plan on giving us the series reboot we had to have.

"We took a year off and said 'what is Need for Speed?'" said lead designer James Mouat. "So we wanted to bring it back, cherry-pick the best stuff, reboot the franchise so that we could say this is what made it great, this is what will make it great and when we move forward with our series you'll know this is what Need for Speed is."

SPIT AND POLISH >> The most obvious enhancement in Need for Speed is the graphical upgrade from the previous entry Rivals. The brief story introduction featuring real-life actors telling us about the oh-so-serious world of street racing seamlessly shifts to your virtual car that I initially assumed had to be real - it looked that good.

Of course making cars look great in games is nothing new, but removing the shackles of the last generation of consoles seems to have pushed Need for Speed forward, perhaps even beyond its competitors.

As impressive as the cars themselves are your urban playground of Ventura Bay is also a step up for the series. Described as Los Angeles without the boring bits, my time in Ventura was spent drifting around the rain soaked streets and admiring how detailed this gritty environment looked before accidentally slamming into the side of a truck or racing rival.

Speaking of which, car handling can be easily tuned by shifting a single slider from Grip to Drift or leaving it somewhere in the middle. More Grip mean more breaking and finding your racing line while Drift gives you a more arcade-y feel similar to the recent Need for Speed games. And if you want to get tec°ical you can skip that simplified option and indulge in an overwhelming amount of vehicle handling and setup options.

DOING IT FOR THE POINTS >> A big push in Need for Speed is the 'Five Ways to Play' that is broken down into Speed, Style, Build, Crew and Outlaw. Speed is what it is - drive fast and don't crash, Style is about precision driving such as drifting or sharp cornering, Build is based off how 'fully sick' your ride looks, Crew is about racing alongside friends at close proximity while Outlaw rewards you for pissing off the cops and not getting caught.

Basically drifting your customised Skyline around a corner, narrowly missing a cop then gunning it down the straight with your buddies will earn you precious reputation points to progress the story and in turn cash to further modify your ride with high-performance parts and cosmetic upgrades like neons and sick rims.

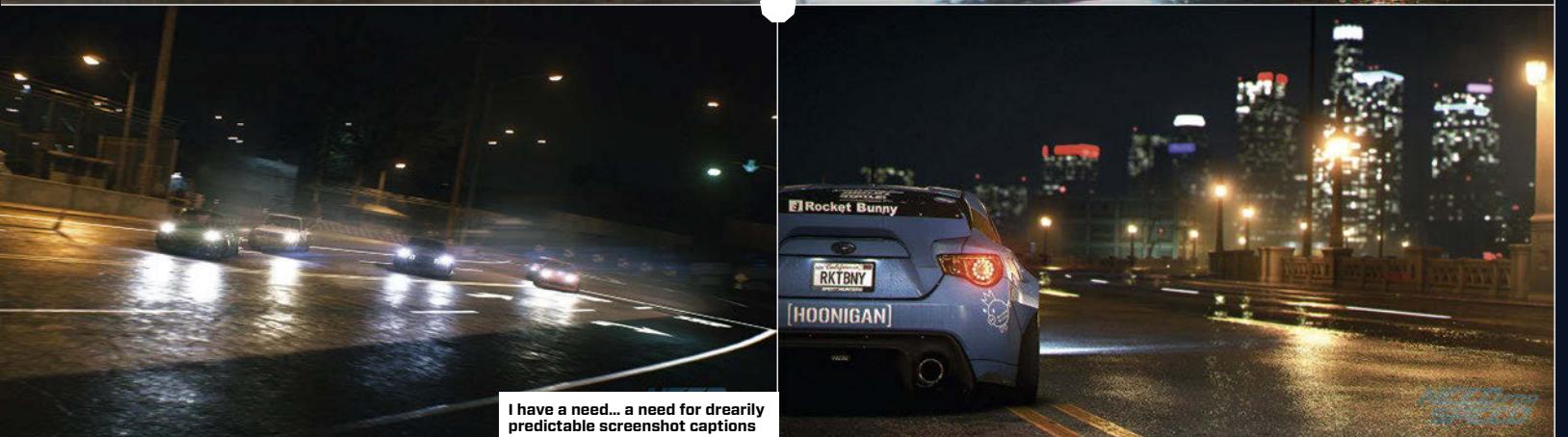
My overall impression from my demo was that Ghost Games have been given the freedom they need to make this long running series their own. The fat has been trimmed in some areas, the parts that worked have been brought to the forefront and for the first time in a long time I'm looking forward to playing a Need for Speed game. **«**

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC
CATEGORY: Racing /
DEVELOPER: Ghost Games
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DUE: NOVEMBER 5, 2015



DO YOU EVEN ONLINE?

Though things could change before Need for Speed hits shelves currently all signs point to the game being online-only, even on consoles and in single-player. There are a lot of intelligently integrated multiplayer features meaning you may actually want to be online when playing alone, but still, did EA learn nothing from 2013's SimCity?



Not pictured: anything of interest to anyone ever

THE BANNER SAGA 2

HEIDI KEMPS WIELDS A MIGHTY BANNER HAMMER

Despite the modern consoles being able to push more polygons than we'd ever be able to count, there are still plenty of folks out there sticking with 2D art. We've seen a lot of indie devs go with a 2D pixel art style for their games to varied effectiveness. What made *The Banner Saga* such a standout, however, was its incredible hand-drawn art inspired by classic animated features. When combined with a branching story inspired by the Vikings of history and a challenging turn-based combat system, you had a game that was truly unique and wonderful. Thankfully, the Saga continues on.



The *Banner Saga 2* picks up hot on the heels of the previous title – in fact, you'll be able to load your previous data into the game and have it pick up right where you left off, with every decision you made taken into account. (If you haven't played the previous game, you'll have the option of picking one of two "canonical" data sets to start.) No matter where you start, however, one fact remains constant: things really aren't looking good for the Humans or the Varl right now.

We sampled a bit of Alette's

campaign, where we were almost immediately forced to make some tough choices: boats broke down, our forces were ambushed, and we were forced into an extremely difficult fight. We didn't get to see the new classes – or the new dual-classing ability – due to some poor choices that resulted in Dredge Skulkers mauling us as an invisible pack, but I'm sure we'll have another chance to see them before the game hits late this year. And then... then friends, sweet revenge will be ours. **«**

PLATFORM: PC / CATEGORY: Turn Based Strategy / DEVELOPER: Stoic Studios / PUBLISHER: Versus Evil / DUE: 2015

AFRO SAMURAI 2: REVENGE OF KUMA

HEIDI KEMPS CUT HER BLOODY SWATHE

» Afro Samurai 2 falls into that category of "sequels you didn't expect". The original game didn't quite match the high expectations of press and players, but the development team of Afro Samurai 2 liked the setting, style, and character so much that they decided to give it another go. The result is Afro Samurai 2, rising from the dead husk of the original to deliver a fresh new experience.

Those who played the original game will be excited to hear that RZA is back on board as soundtrack producer. Beyond that, however, things are a lot different – and a lot better. The visuals have been revamped to match the standards



of next-gen hardware. Instead of Afro, this time you're controlling Afro's former friend Jinno – known as "Kuma" due to his robotic teddy-bear head. Kuma blames Afro for the death of their master, and has gone to great lengths in his quest for vengeance, including transforming into a fearsome cyborg. Fans invested in the Afro Samurai saga across anime, comics, and games will be pleased to know that James Defelice, who co-wrote *American Sniper*, is penning the game's script.

The biggest change in AS2, however, is the core gameplay itself. The targeted slow-motion slashing of the original game has been expanded upon: instead of just one core skill, you can now make use of numerous combat skills. You'll be able to power up your skills, too, making Kuma into the modern master of custom chopping.

Afro Samurai 2's tale of bloody revenge will be split across 3 episodes, with the first releasing later this year. **«**

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: Action / DEVELOPER: Redacted Studios / PUBLISHER: Versus Evil / DUE: 2015



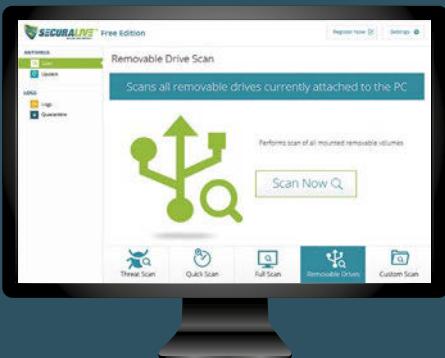
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GALAK-Z

HEIDI KEMPS HAS A TICKET FOR THE NOSTALGIA TRAIN

Galak-Z is one of the strangest mixes of nostalgia I've yet seen. It's a blend of retro-styled space exploration physics and shooting with a love of random anime dubs shown on oddball American UHF TV stations in the 80s. I'm not saying that like it's a BAD thing, mind you, because while Galak-Z has been in development for quite some time, the game's nearing release - and it looks and plays great.

Galak-Z is the second title from indie developer 17-bit, whose previous game was *Skulls of the Shogun*. Rather than an *Advance Wars*-flavored turn-based undead samurai simulation, Galak-Z is a spacefaring, free-exploring procedurally generated scrolling shooter seasoned with the goofy character designs and crazy heroics of late 70s/early 80s anime.

If you hear "space shooter" and think something along the lines of *Gradius*, well, Galak-Z isn't really like that. Your ship doesn't scroll in one direction, instead, it propels in every conceivable direction through the sheer force of its own player-controlled thrusters. Think *Asteroids*, or Rare's semi-obscure NES outing *Solar Jetman*. At least the craft is resilient: smacking

into walls happens and happens often as you're adjusting to the control scheme. Only some of the terrain is truly threatening, which is good, because it means most of these procedurally generated environments will be safe for you.

Of course, that doesn't mean that everything else that's lurking in these environments will be safe for you. The enemies in Galak-Z are powered by an advanced AI

■ QUICK DECISION MAKING DETERMINES WHETHER YOU SURVIVE A HERO OR BECOME FLOTSAM ■

engine called Cyntient, and they are absolutely tenacious - once an enemy pilot catches a glimpse of your craft entering his territory, he is not going to let up on you, and if several enemy pilots see you at once... well, it's either fight or flight, and you'd better have the skills to make either of those outcomes happen! You come equipped with two weapons: a fairly weak laser shot and a much more effective -

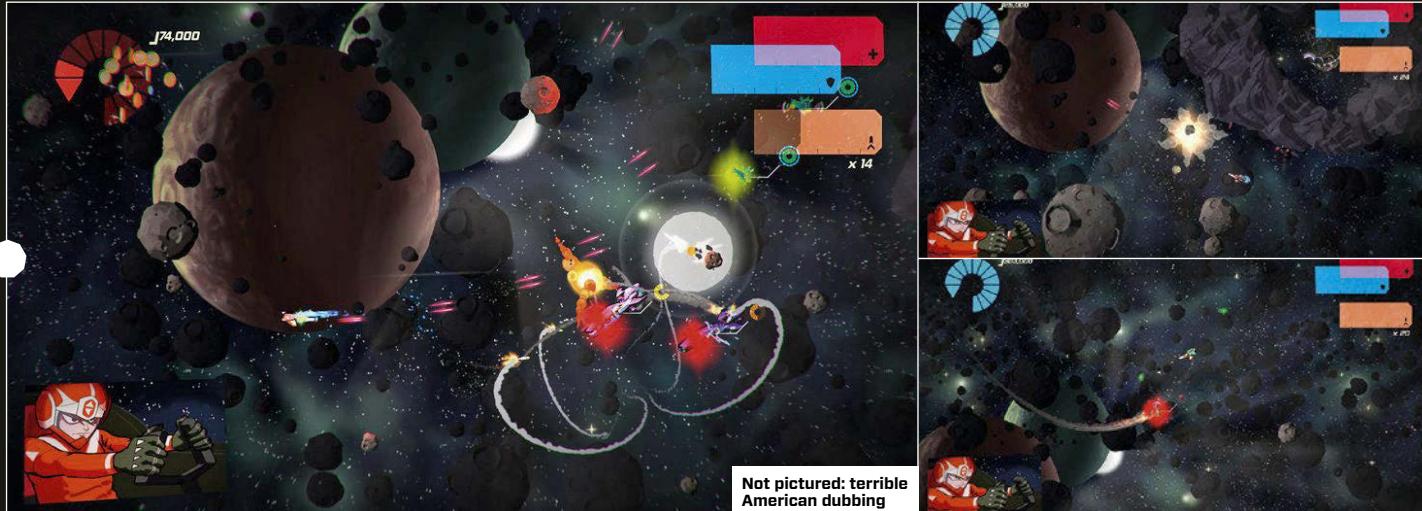
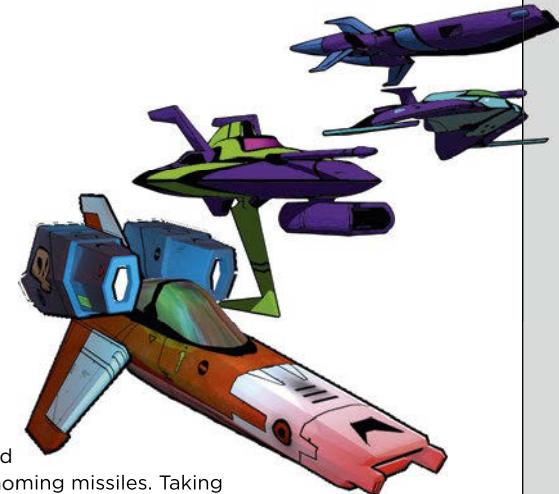
and much more limited - stock of homing missiles. Taking damage isn't the end of the mission: you have a stock of shields that can regenerate over time, but if they go down, just a few unlucky hits can spell a spacewreck.

Imperial forces aren't the only threats here, either.

The environments themselves are filled with fearsome alien lifeforms, some of which are merely hindrances and some of which are actively harmful. What's noteworthy, however, is that they exist with their own distinct AI behaviors, which can lead them to be aggressive towards other creatures - including the imperial forces that are hot on your tail. Quick decision-making and using the environments - and the lifeforms within them - to your advantage will determine whether you survive as a hero or become mere flotsam in the harsh vacuum of space.

Galak-Z will be hitting PS4, Vita, and PC later this year. ■

PLATFORM: PS4, Vita, PC / CATEGORY: Shooter / DEVELOPER: 17-BIT / PUBLISHER: 17-BIT / DUE: 2015



RODEA THE SKY SOLDIER

HEIDI KEMPS JUST WANTS TO GET HIGH

» Yuji Naka's been a bit quiet since leaving Sega several years ago, but he's been keeping busy with a lot of projects through his company Prope: the odd Wii/DS puzzler Ivy the Kiwi, StreetPass Manor and StreetPass Fishing for the 3DS, and a whole mess of mobile titles. But he hasn't abandoned his roots in creating unique and engaging platform games, as Rodea the Sky Soldier shows.

Rodea is a game with a long history – first announced for the Wii back in 2010, Rodea is now a Wii U and 3DS game. (The original Wii version actually comes with the Wii U game in Japan and with first-run copies in North America, an Australian release is still undecided as of this writing.) It's the story of the titular Rodea, a mechanized warrior of the sky kingdom of Garuda, who is unearthed from stasis after a thousand years. Rodea was designed to seal away the Key of Time from Emperor Geardo, leader of the neighboring kingdom of Naga. Rodea befriends Ion, the young mechanist who repaired him from his broken state, and together the pair fight against the resurrection of the long-lost Naga Empire.

As the title might imply, Rodea is

a game based around flight. It's not flight like in Naka's famous NiGHTS into Dreams, however – this is full-3D action that delivers an exhilarating feeling of soaring through the air. Think of a mix between the flight and space control of Gravity Rush and the sort of high-speed momentum sections you'd see in a Sonic game, and you're not far off from how Rodea feels in action.

■ **THE COLORFULLY CRAFTED VISUALS MAKE FLIGHT AND DISCOVERY A TRUE JOY ■**

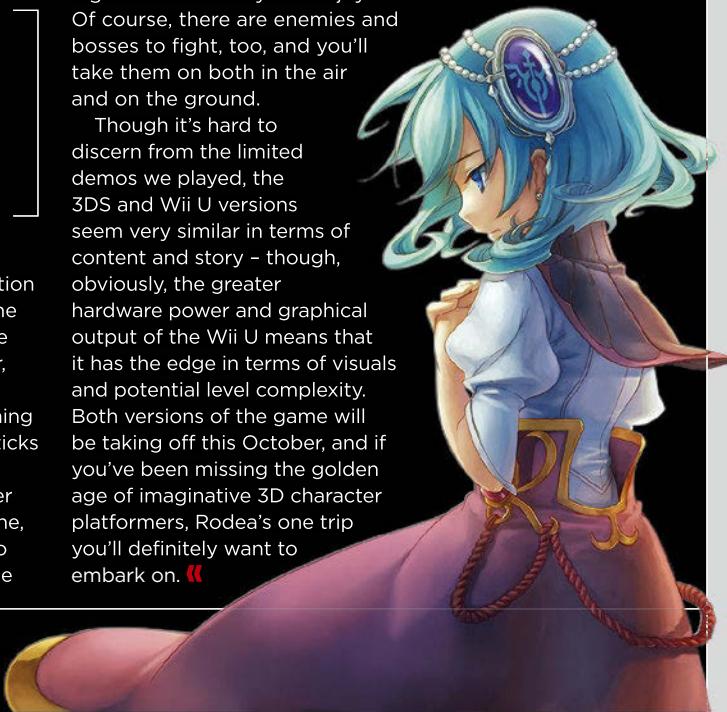
Controlling Rodea through the skies involves utilizing a combination of flight techniques. A press of the X button launches Rodea into the air. He can't stay airborne forever, though, so you'll need to find a place to aim him. Moving and aiming Rodea involves the two control sticks and shoulder buttons on the Wii U, and the Circle Pad and shoulder buttons on the 3DS. While airborne, you can use A to move forward to launch melee strikes and projectile

attacks, respectively. You'll learn special movement skills, like a high-speed boost attack and a wall-jump, as you progress through the game.

It takes a bit of getting used to, but once you've got the controls down, Rodea feels fantastic. You have an incredible degree of control over where and how you explore these sprawling environments, and the colorfully crafted visuals make flight and discovery a true joy. Of course, there are enemies and bosses to fight, too, and you'll take them on both in the air and on the ground.

Though it's hard to discern from the limited demos we played, the 3DS and Wii U versions seem very similar in terms of content and story – though, obviously, the greater hardware power and graphical output of the Wii U means that it has the edge in terms of visuals and potential level complexity. Both versions of the game will be taking off this October, and if you've been missing the golden age of imaginative 3D character platformers, Rodea's one trip you'll definitely want to embark on. ■

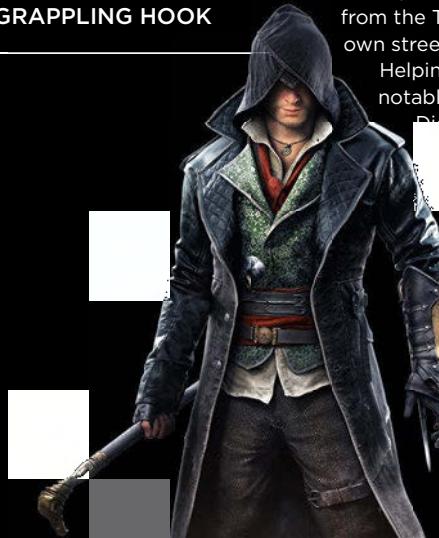
PLATFORM: Wii U, 3DS / CATEGORY: Action/Adventure / DEVELOPER: Prope / PUBLISHER: NIS / DUE: OCTOBER 2015



Rodea, moments before being shot out of the sky by Russian nationalists

ASSASSIN'S CREED: SYNDICATE

ANDREW WHITEHEAD WENT TO LONDON BUT SADLY FORGOT TO TAKE HIS GRAPPLING HOOK



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC / CATEGORY: Ubisoft / DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Quebec / PUBLISHER: Ubisoft / DUE: October 23, 2015 (Xbox, PS4), TBA 2015 (PC)

Sequels, remakes and comebacks again seem big on the agenda for developers of late. I mean they always are, but this year feels like there's more than ever. Anyway, Assassin's Creed: Syndicate fulfils two of those categories - it's yet another sequel in the long running series and is hopefully the comeback we've all been waiting for since the less than stellar previous game, Assassin's Creed: Unity.

Set in grimy old London in 1868 the Industrial Revolution is in full swing but so too is the world of underground crime. Gangs are thriving in a time when the Assassin Brotherhood is all but a memory and the Templars have finally regained control of the Church and the Monarchy.

Here we find the two stars of the game - twins Jacob and Evie Frye. Leaving the old home behind these two trained assassins, loyal to the ancient Creed, are in town to take back power from the Templars while growing their own street gang, The Rooks.

Helping them along the way are notable historical figures like Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin - it turns out were more just academic geniuses were also apparently big fans of killing people from the shadows. Really though all I could think is how are they going to manage to shoehorn in Jack the Ripper despite him not being a threat until 1888. Then again historical accuracy is collateral damage in an Assassin's Creed game.

Players can now switch between the two protagonists at any time and utilise their individual skills. The main difference that players will notice is Jacob feels like more of a brawler while Evie has more stealth prowess.

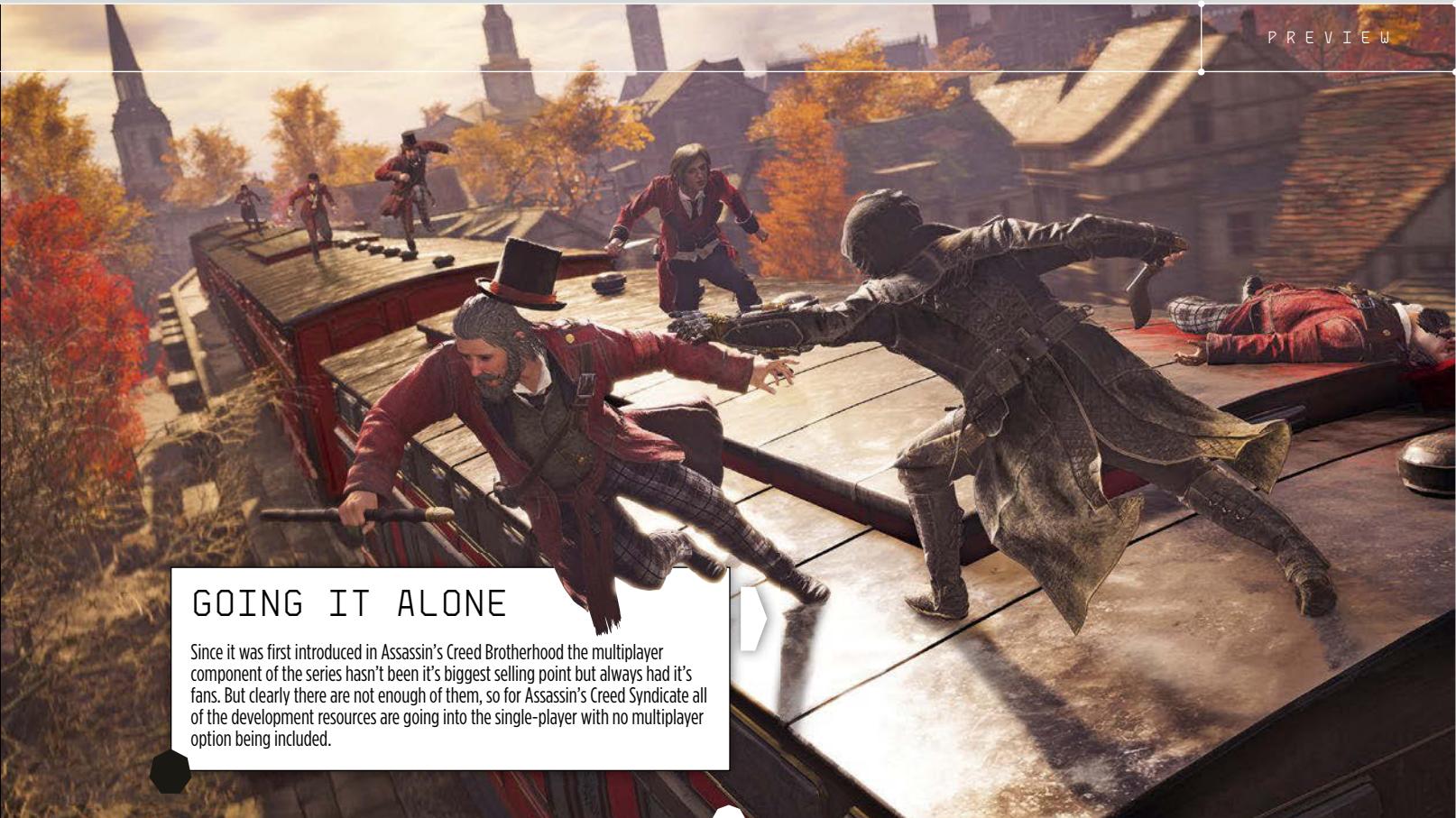
PLAYING KNIFEY SPOONY >> Weapons this time around are more modernised to reflect the time period, with the brass knuckles, a cane sword, a Nepalese kukri blade and a trusty revolver being your primary tools of engagement. Combat itself is a much faster affair with enemies not waiting around for their turn as much and multiple foes going in for the kill at once.

There's also a tonal shift in combat, with Syndicate having a more brutal feel to it than any of the previous games. Punches land with a real thud here as your brass knuckles pummel enemies into submission. It's not Mortal Kombat X of course, but it's certainly a visceral step up from other Assassin's Creed games.

A gadget making its debut in Syndicate is the rope-launcher that complements the classic free-running you've been using for years to scale buildings. To use it simply walk up to any wall and press the prompted button and you'll automatically shoot up a grappling hook, attach it to a ledge and start ascending faster than you could with your hands and feet alone.

So too can you use the rope-launcher to create long zip-lines between buildings that help you move horizontally across large distances without having to touch the ground or find an alternative path. This becomes increasingly important the more you play as London features some very wide streets and varied building heights.





GOING IT ALONE

Since it was first introduced in Assassin's Creed Brotherhood the multiplayer component of the series hasn't been its biggest selling point but always had its fans. But clearly there are not enough of them, so for Assassin's Creed Syndicate all of the development resources are going into the single-player with no multiplayer option being included.



meaning the rope-launcher is handy for keeping the game's momentum going.

Another new addition is ground vehicles in the form of the horse and cart. Granted previous games have had rideable horses before, but the addition of a carriage adds a Victorian-era Grand Theft Auto layer to the game (as if multiple protagonists wasn't enough) as you race down the cobbled streets of London.

During my demo I had to pursue a target who was escaping in their own private carriage. While in pursuit I was forced to start ramming my enemies out of the way before climbing on to the roof and firing off a few shots from my revolver. I was also told you can leap to other carriages from here, but the chase was getting hectic enough as it was without with that added pressure and landing a deadly moving vehicle jump. Plus I felt bad for the horse and didn't want to stress it out anymore.

THE ADDITION OF A CARRIAGE ADDS A VICTORIAN-ERA GRAND THEFT AUTO LAYER TO THE GAME

Another vehicle that I wish I knew more about are the massive steam trains that I did manage to see briefly as I watched Jacob clamour over one while in pursuit of an enemy. There were also a lot of boats floating in the river Thames, but as is often the case with these demos, details are hard to extract from tight-lipped developers.

Regardless of what we do and don't know if you stop and think about the state of the world during this time period it's easy to think of ways Syndicate could be the radical departure the series so desperately needs.

The Assassin's Creed series has been a mixed bag of late. Assassin's Creed III was a bit of a misfire but then Black Flag turned out great while Unity went off the rails again. Maybe it's like the Star Trek films where every other instalment is the one to watch?

But anyway, during my time with the game I did manage to get a good feel for how it will play from moment to moment but what will define it is how compelling the long game is. It's how engaging building and maintain a gang on the mean streets of Victorian era is while you're also working on your next big target.

So here's hoping Assassin's Creed: Syndicate can bring this once mighty series back from the doldrums and restore our collective faith in the franchise. I think a lot of gamers are ready to move on and love this series again; all they need is a game they can rally behind. No pressure or anything Ubisoft. ■

GIGANTIC

HEIDI KEMPS HAS BIG BIG LOVE FOR THE NEW MOBA ON THE BLOCK



PLATFORM: Xbox One/PC / CATEGORY: MOBA /
DEVELOPER: Motiga / PUBLISHER: Microsoft /
DUE: LATE 2015

What's the hot new game genre that people across the globe are crazy excited about? Why, MOBAs, of course! The sheer amount of people playing games like DotA2 and League of Legends is staggering - as is the money and stream views these titles bring in! Yes, MOBAs are a hot ticket in gaming these days... but so far, the market's been completely dominated by the two games I just mentioned above.

Enter a new challenger - Microsoft and developer Motiga's Gigantic, a visually striking hybrid of MOBA and FPS for Xbox One and Windows 10. Rather than the isometric-view, lane-driven combat of most well-known MOBAs, Gigantic is all about five-on-five third person action. While it might not be the first MOBA with this perspective (that honor goes to Hi Rez Studio's Smite, which is also coming to Xbox One), it's certainly the most unique MOBA we've yet seen.

The first thing that strikes you about Gigantic is just how colorful it is. Not in a typical "light bloom everywhere" sense, either - the game is built of big, bright cel-shaded arenas and outrageously designed characters that really stand out from the pack. The attack effects and character animations also contribute to the game's strong sense of personality. Speaking of personality... if one had to wager a guess, the word Gigantic in the title likely refers to the game's "Guardians." These are the massive creatures that lord over each of the two combating teams. In the E3 demo, these were a fierce-looking dragon and a rather tubby (but no less intimidating) gryphon, though we're told more

guardians will be in the final product. The guardians are the ones that grant your team power and resurrect you when you fall - and they're also the beings you're tasked with protecting.

Upon starting a game, you will pick one of many different heroes to play as. The Motiga crew has gone to great lengths to accommodate a huge variety of playstyle preferences. The fighters are as varied visually as they are in abilities: Tyto the Swift is a strange luchador/ninja hybrid who dazzles with swift, acrobatic skills (and a pet ferret), the wolf-deer Voden combines ranged fighting with healing skills, and the sultry, be-tentacled Xenobia bestows curses that leave all debilitated, and so on. As you level during the fight, you can gain upgraded basic skills by means of skill trees.

The game controls akin to third-person shooters, with separate setups for controller and keyboard and mouse. (If you are a console purist and don't feel comfortable being matched up against the PC crowd with their fancy laser mice and mechanical keyboards, worry not - you'll be able to opt to only battle with other console players.) The goal is pretty cut-and-dry: protect your Guardian and take down the one on the opposing team.

Numerous points on the game map are marked: these are Summoning Circles. When activated, they generate energy that your team's Guardian feeds upon. Gaining map control is a key part of the game, so grabbing Summoning Circles early on - and taking control of enemy Summoning Circles - is crucial. True to their name, you can also use them to summon up to three creatures to the battlefield. These creatures bestow various beneficial effects to





M-M-MERCY KILL!

Matches in Gigantic are said to take about fifteen to twenty minutes in an even fight, seven minutes if one side is completely routed. One of the goals of the game's design is to end the game as quickly as possible if a comeback proves impossible to mount: nobody enjoys slogging through a game that they've lost early on.



Here's hoping the community isn't as toxic as LoL's

your team: for example, Bloomers will provide healing skills, while Cerberuses act as scouts that let you see enemy positions. These creatures can be upgraded to be more powerful over time. They'll also vigorously defend any circle they've been summoned to against enemy attacks.

For the most part, the Guardians are content to sit in their place on the battlefield. While they might seem like easy targets, they can swat you away like gnats should you approach them unprepared. Even if you can hit them, you'll discover that your puny little hero is incapable of actually damaging the Guardian: the only thing that can knock them down is your own Guardian, by means of a rampage powered by the Summoning Circles you have activated and the opposing team members you have felled. After your Guardian attacks, the opposing team's Guardian has its heart exposed for a precious few seconds: only during this time can you actually deal any damage to the

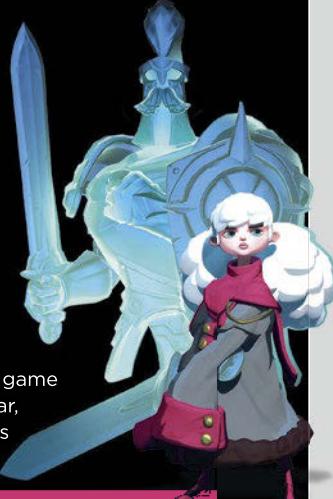
■ A FIVE-STORY CREATURE RAINING DESTRUCTION IN ITS WAKE IS A BIT HARD TO MISS ■

creature. Wounding the guardian in this state will take off a chunk of its life, and when it has been wounded three times, the match is won.

Of course, even when a Guardian is a sitting duck, those aiming to protect it certainly aren't. Getting a knockdown on an opposing team's Guardian doesn't mean squat if you can't actually damage it, which is where defensive techniques come into play. It's pretty obvious when one Guardian goes to attack another – seeing a five-story creature zoom across the battlefield raining destruction in its wake is something that's a bit hard to miss – so when you know your big guy

is taking a hit, it's time to get all hands on deck to protect them from harm. Success in Gigantic is achieved through a combination of careful map control, strong offense, and coordinated defense when the need arises.

Both Microsoft and Motiga have big hopes for Gigantic, and are already working to cultivate a player community for the game's launch. It's certainly shaping up to be an interesting genre hybrid – one that looks gorgeous, to boot – but whether or not Gigantic will catch on in the increasingly crowded MOBA market is yet to be seen. Gigantic will be free to download and play, with optional paid premium content available. While the game is set for release late this year, Xbox One and Steam players will be able to enjoy a beta sometime this August. ■



BATTLEBORN

FEELING SYMPATHY FOR A
SENTIENT MUSHROOM CAME QUIET
EASILY TO **ANDREW WHITEHEAD**



PREVIOUS



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC /
CATEGORY: First-person arena shooter /
DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software /
PUBLISHER: 2K Games / DUE: 2015

» Genre bending masters Gearbox have emerged from their lab and like gaming mad scientists have mixed together a MOBA-shooter-80s-cartoon hybrid in the form of *Battleborn*.

Just like the end of the fourth series of the new *Doctor Who* something is going around the universe and snuffing out all the stars. Only one functional solar system now remains so naturally every living being with a spaceship has converged here and managed put aside their differences to deal with the source of this doomsday event – the Varelsi. Their plan is a simple, very video gamey one – each faction sends forth their greatest champions to form an elite team that destroy the Varelsi and hopefully bring back a glimmer of hope to this very grim reality.

HERE COME THE COSPLAYERS >

"The core feature of the game is that it features these 25 characters, and that each one of them is radically different," says Melissa Miller, 2K Games Director of product development. "At Gearbox they've said each one of these guys is the star of a game that has not been made yet. And that's really true."

My time with the game was spent in the campaign playing co-operatively with three others, the maximum allowed in this mode. I asked about drop-in-drop-out multiplayer but was told some of those details are still being worked out.

The first round of my hands-on time I chose to play as the aristocratic, sword-wielding Phoebe who looked like she was dressed up for an intergalactic ball. A close combat character, my primary attack saw me using rushing up on enemies and stabbing them over and over with Phoebe's long sabers. When things got too crazy I'd use her teleporting Phasigate attack to shift to a new target or launch a Blade Cascade that saw a hail of swords rain down from the sky over a large area.

My second playthrough was with the mechanical Iron Man-like beast Caldarius who also had some handy close up attacks including one that had him launching himself at an enemy to perform a heavily damaging Gravity Burst. His jetpack was also pretty handy and allowed me to move much faster than my companions while dodging incoming attacks. He may look huge, but Caldarius could move.

Other characters on show included a mechanical butler that's also an expert sniper, a sentient warrior mushroom and a sly riff on the space marine archetype called Oscar Mike. There's so many characters it's pointless to list them all here but it really does feel like Gearbox were firing on all cylinders when they came up with this collection of misfits and weirdos.

Also of note is if you do decide to play the game on your own, which is a viable option of course, you will be totally on your own as the game doesn't feature friendly AI-controlled teammates.

PLAY IT ALREADY >> My demo featured only one mission and that saw me take over an enemy base before calling

HURT THE ONES YOU LOVE

Despite my time with the game being almost entirely focused on co-operative play there's also a regular free-for-all deathmatch mode in Battleborn. Also of note is that this mode will feature its own maps which are not just cut-down campaign levels. So if you'd rather kill your friends than play with them you're in luck.

in a giant mech-tank-thing, escorting it to a location some distance away, then holding down our new location while waiting for extraction. The wait wasn't made by a giant enemy spider-thing, which showed up and started gunking up the place.

As I mentioned before I did this stage twice in a row with different characters and it felt drastically different each time. The first time through we worked well as a team, healing and defending, splitting up the enemies and reviving fallen comrades. I even managed to save up some in-game currency and in the final stages of the mission I purchased repairs for a few mounted turrets that helped keep the spider-boss-thing at bay.

The second time through the difficulty was turned up and suddenly we needed a much more defensive style of play. Reviving fallen friends was key to survival, as was not biting off more than you could chew with big enemies. We had to rely on the ranged guys to take down big attackers and the melee guys to deal with the fast moving little ones.

In one sitting I saw the same level twice in two very different ways. This definitely bodes well for the final game.

BORDER-BORN-LANDS >>

There's an obvious comparison you could make between

WHEN BATTLEBORN COMES OUT IT'S GOING TO BE A NEW REFERENCE POINT

Gearbox's new baby Battleborn and their studio defining hit Borderlands. Both are first-person shooters with tongue-in-cheek humour with a cartoonish style. But the big difference is Borderlands is a loot game while Battleborn is about pre-defined characters with customisable abilities that form the Helix system.

Anytime during the game players can call up the Helix menu and select two different perks to use, each of which give you new powers such as higher jumping at the cost of less overall health. As your progress and gain more experience points in a match you'll unlock new and better Helix upgrades. These last only a while in that current session, so the next time you play it's back to Helix level one with everyone else.

"On top of [the Helix system] is a character ranking system," added Miller, "and that's permanent. All of the experience points you gain in story and competitive play will increase your character ranking. It's 10 levels per

character and as you level up you get new skins and additional augmentations that feed back into the Helix system.

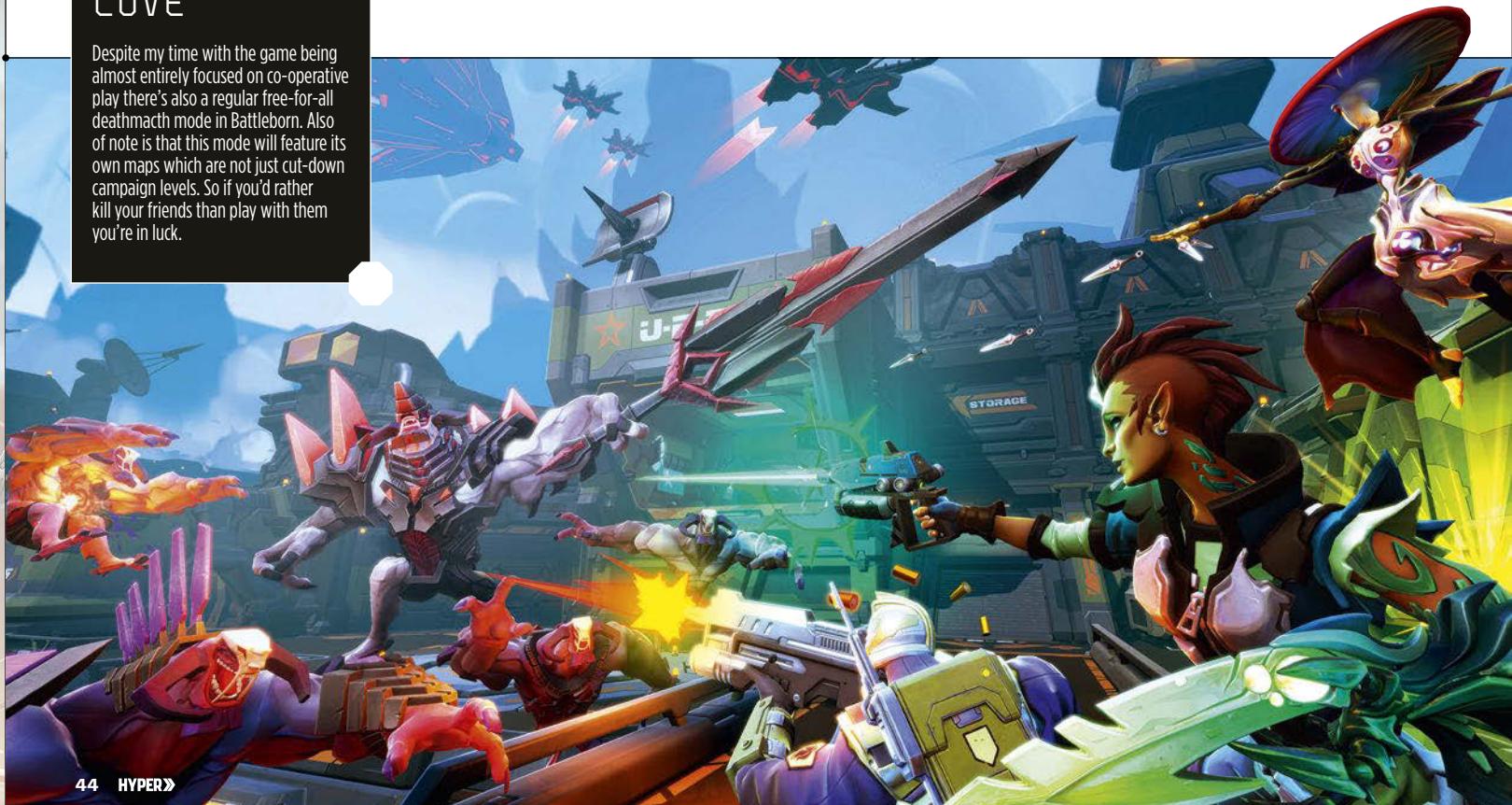
"Then on top of that is the Command Rank and that affects your player profile [as an overall rank]. If you're familiar with Borderlands it's similar to your Badass Rank."

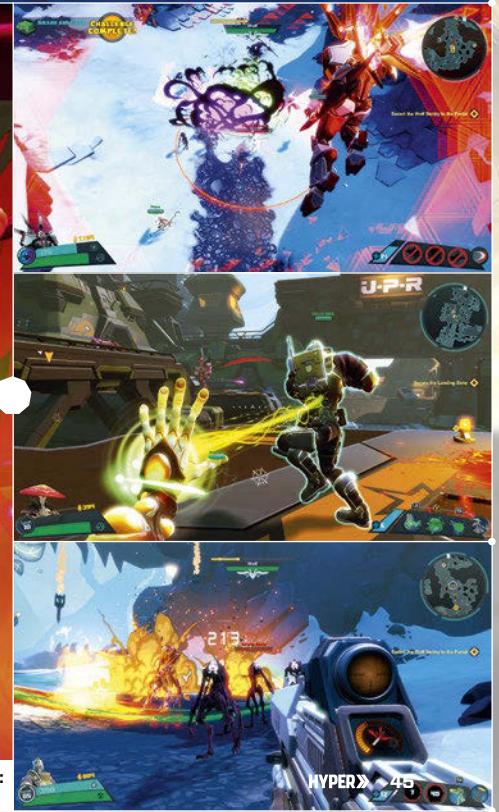
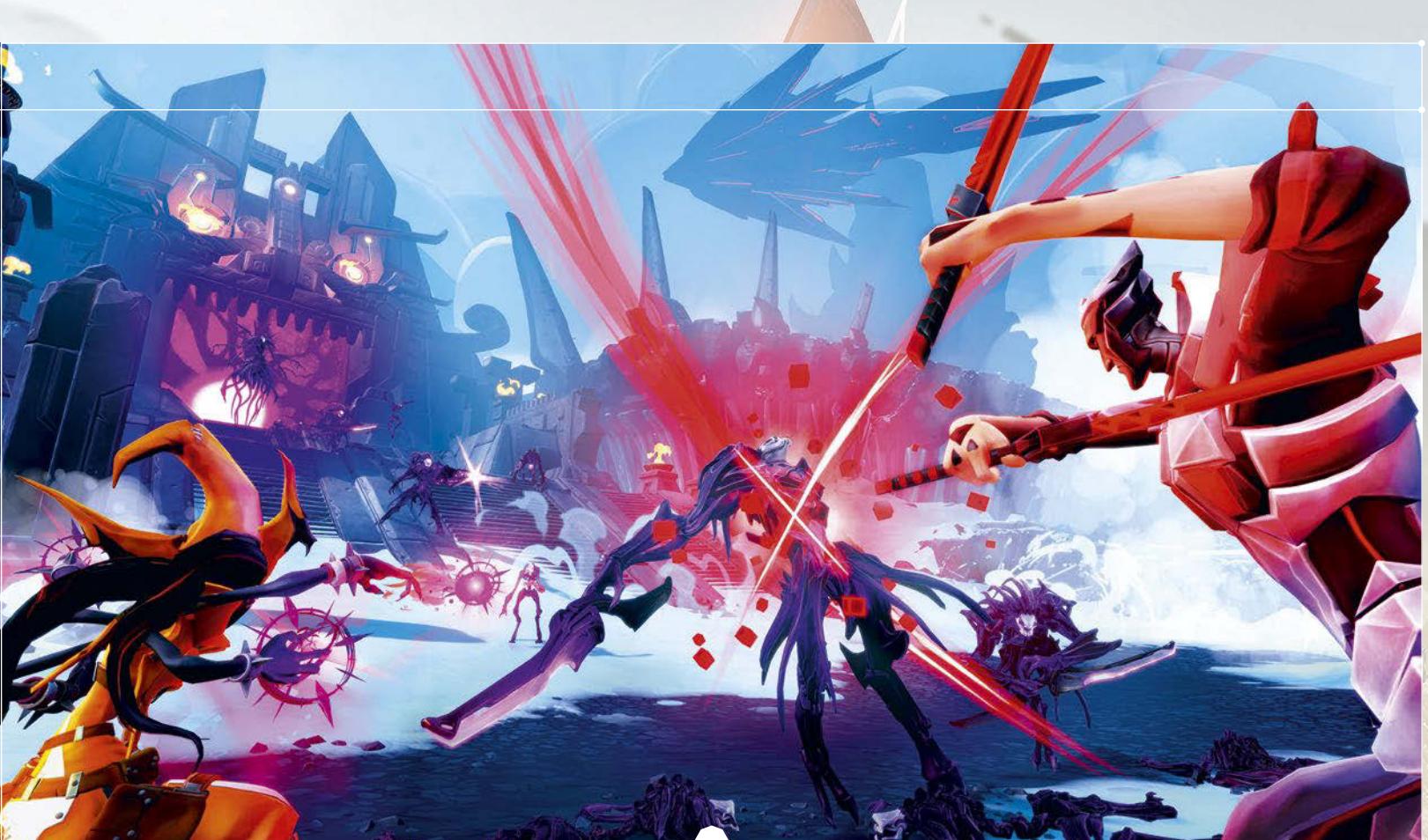
IT WAS A MONSTER MASH

>> "I remember when [the first Borderlands] was coming out and people kept trying to define it by other games saying 'it's Halo meet Diablo' and all these other things," said Miller. "But then when it came out people got it. They got it when they got their hands on it and suddenly Borderlands became its own touchstone. [So now people] can say 'it's like Borderlands'.

"And I feel like Battleborn is doing that same thing. Gearbox isn't afraid to take ideas and designs that are seemingly in conflict with each other if they really believe there's this fun core about them, then combine them in ways you didn't know you wanted. I feel like when Battleborn comes out it's going to be this new reference point."

Those are mighty big words, but frankly in a sea of remakes and sequels it's hard to not get suckered in and believe the hype for a new property. And it's even easier when that game is as pretty, fun and lovingly crafted as Battleborn. **KK**





Chicks with bows:
so hot right now

HYPERS 45

FORZA MOTORSPORT 6

HEIDI KEMPS HAS OIL FOR BLOOD

Since the dawn of gaming, one of the key measurements of a console's prowess has been how good its racing games looked and played. There's just something about carefully-rendered cars going fast that draws every tech nerd in to nitpick the fine details of vehicle damage, tire tracks left on terrain, and just how accurate those course recreations are. The developers behind the Forza Motorsport series have been happy to oblige on this front, offering some of the most jaw-dropping car visuals and fully-featured racing on the market. With Forza 6, the team is preparing to up the ante once again.

Forza 6 commenced development almost immediately after Forza 5 wrapped, according to creative director Bill Giese. In the year and a half since, the team's made tremendous progress on what's probably the best-looking racing game on the next-gen consoles. Everything runs at a buttery-smooth 1080P and 60FPS, and the tremendous amount of detail in the vehicles and the environments shines at every turn. You don't have to be in a race to ogle car details, either – over 450 of the game's vehicles offer Forzavista mode, which allow you to examine vehicles from every angle, including from inside.

The big new additions to Forza 6, however, are less about the cars and more about the environments. First is the addition of rain and water affecting tracks. You can race in a place that's in the midst of rainfall, or perhaps one where the weather has just let up, and feel the effects of mother nature directly: water splashing and running

across your windshield, the loss of momentum as you splash into a shallow puddle, the terrifying loss of control as your wheels begin to hydroplane upon the rain-slick asphalt below. Not all of the courses in the game offer a rain option – unsurprisingly, downpours are rather rare on Abu Dhabi's Yas Marina – but those that do feature precipitation become a very different racing experience when suitably moist. The team's put a tremendous amount of effort into the water physics, going so far as to make sure hitting water on varying parts of the road feels different on each.

The other important new environmental effect is night racing. I've always been a fan of spectacular nighttime vistas, and racing on famous tracks under the starry skies and bright night lights is quite the visually sumptuous experience. It's more than just a cosmetic thing: some tracks can be seriously dark, leaving you with low visibility at points, and the cooler nighttime tarmac results in less tire grip.

A new career mode wraps up the package nicely: called Stories of Motorsport, this series of single-player experiences promises upwards of 70 hours of gameplay and, in the words of the developers, "experience the past and present of automotive history." Prime those engines – Forza Motorsport 6 goes to the races on September 15th. **KK**

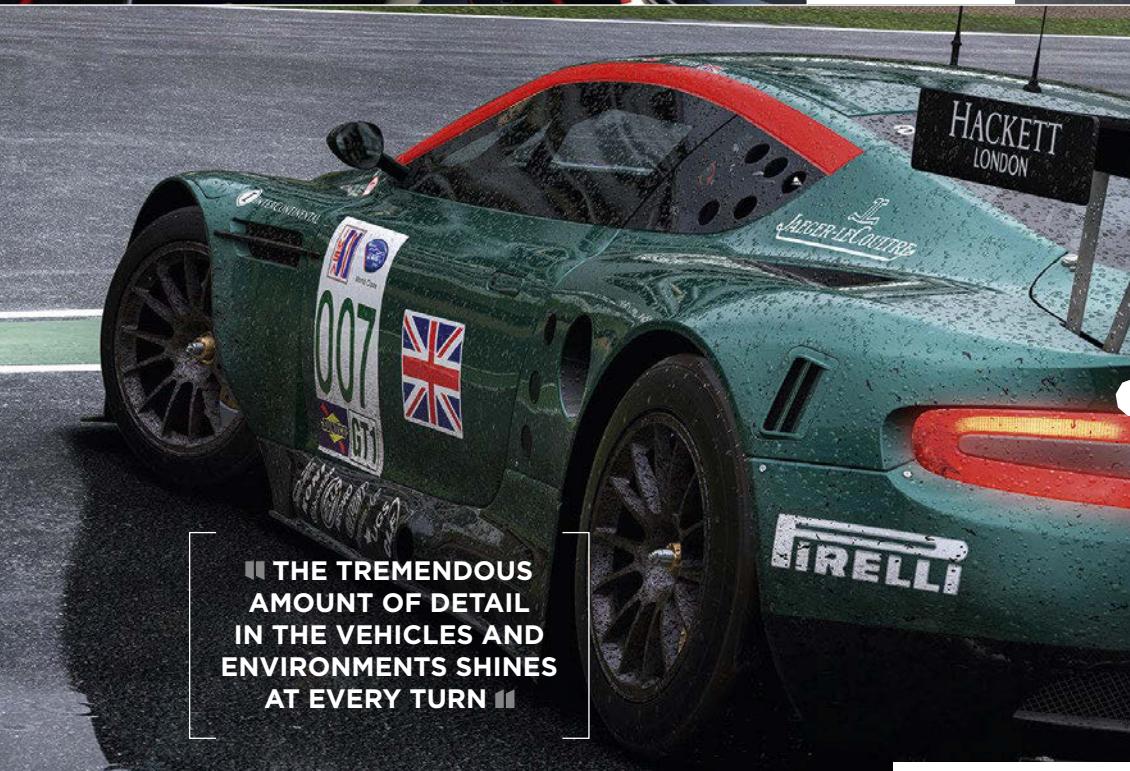
PLATFORM: Xbox One / CATEGORY: Racing Sim /
DEVELOPER: Turn 10 Studios / PUBLISHER:
Microsoft Studios / DUE: September 18





THE FORZA XBOX ONE

Can't afford a fancy sports car? Microsoft might have the next best thing for you. MS is planning to release a special edition Xbox One to coincide with the game's launch. Modeled after the game's cover car, the Ford GT, the light-blue console features a "steering wheel-like" controller (with titanium triggers) and even makes authentic car noises when you perform actions like booting the console or ejecting a disc.



HALO 5: GUARDIANS

ANDREW WHITEHEAD THINKS IT'S EVERYONE ELSE'S FAULT HIS TEAM LOST

After the trainwreck that was the Master Chief Collection there's a bit of added pressure on developer 343 Industries to get Halo 5: Guardians right. That's probably why they're so keen to show off their big new addition to the series' multiplayer canon - Warzone.

This new mode is front-and-centre of Guardians and features the largest battles seen in the series yet with two teams of 12 fighting for control of three bases while defending their headquarters.

The winning team is the first to reach 1000 points, which can be done in a number of ways. The most common way is kill enemies, but that's also the slowest way to win. Taking over the various bases around the map rewards you with a set number of points per second and edges you much closer to victory.

On top of that controlling more bases grants you access to more respawn locations and more places to purchase weapons with a separate currency tied to each individual player. To put it simply each player has a number of points they can use to buy guns or vehicles, with these points regenerating over time. So you

could spend a few points buying a Needler or save them up and buy a Walking Tank. Also, each player also has an individual rank that goes up by killing enemies, allowing them to buy better weapons.

But the real key to victory is to also go after the bosses that randomly appear on the map and give your team even more points for victory. During my time with

THE NEW WARZONE MODE FEATURES THE LARGEST BATTLES SEEN IN THE SERIES YET

the game a few guys and I formed a squad and we made it our focus to go after the bosses while our teammates held down a few of the bases. Our strategy proved effective as our side began to get ahead in the points race - but the war was far from over.

Biding their time and saving their points the opposing side started buying up rocket launchers and deploying Warthogs then took over

one of our bases that we had held the entire match. Coming from behind for the win, the score was literally 990 to 1000 by the end. We lost, but it was hard to be mad with a match that close.

My second game was a far more one-sided affair with the opposing team scoring an early victory by controlling all the bases, breaking into our headquarters and destroying our energy-core - a move that grants them an instant-win.

My first round was played with guys that worked as a team. My second game was with guys that played as individuals. And those were the results.

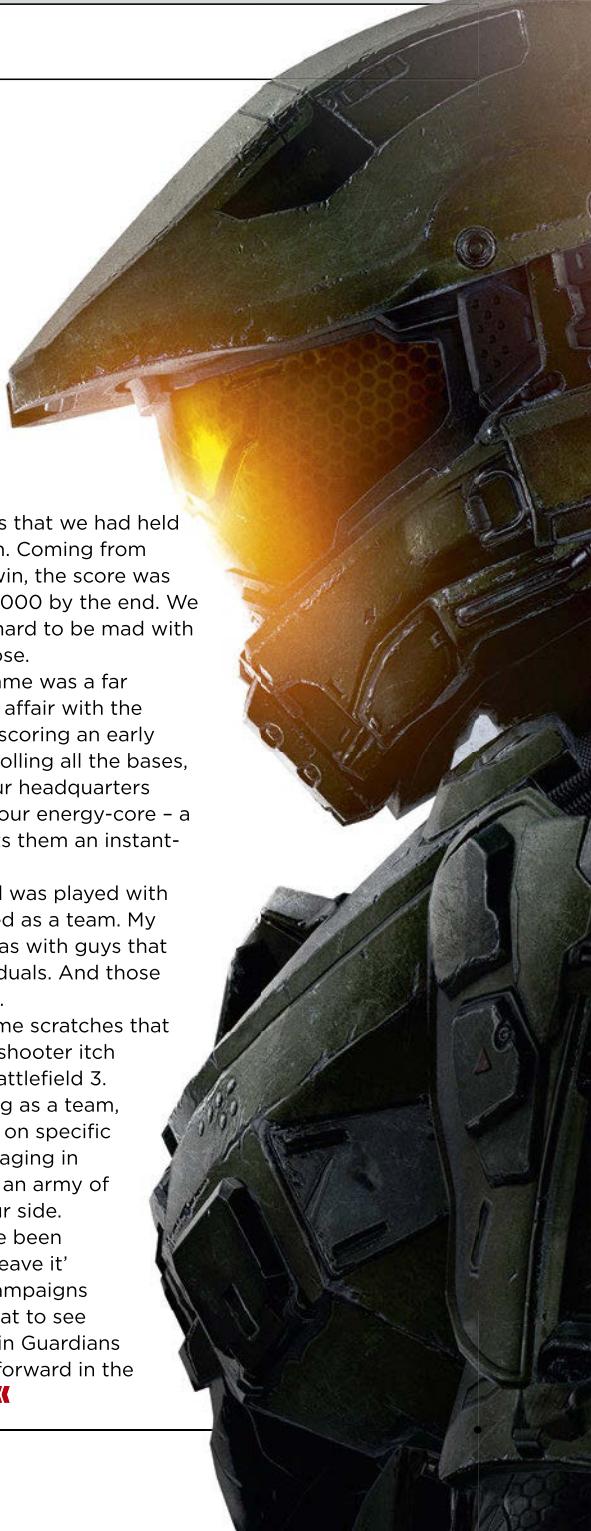
Warzone for me scratches that big multiplayer shooter itch I've had since Battlefield 3. It's about playing as a team, focusing efforts on specific targets and engaging in big battles with an army of Spartans by your side.

Personally I've been a bit 'take it or leave it' with the Halo campaigns lately, so it's great to see the multiplayer in Guardians take a big step forward in the right direction. «

PLATFORM: Xbox One / CATEGORY: First-person shooter / DEVELOPER: 343 Industries / PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios / DUE: October 27, 2015



Not pictured: Andrew's humiliating defeat



MIGHTY NO. 9

HEIDI KEMPS STANDS FOR EVERLASTING PEACE

It's ironic that Capcom showcased a collection of classic Mega Man legacy titles at the same time Mighty No. 9 was being shown at a trade event for the first time. Mighty No. 9 is very clearly a spiritual successor to Capcom's world-famous super fighting robot platformer franchise - it's even spearheaded by one of Mega Man's central creators, Keiji Inafune. As one of the first major game crowdfunding success stories, Mighty No. 9 has attracted a lot of public attention - both positive and negative. For a while, it was the highest-funded game on Kickstarter, so it's understandably come under a lot of scrutiny. Inafune's team seems to have taken feedback into account, however, and the finished product will be getting a multiplatform release courtesy of Deep Silver in Australia.

In the maybe-not-so-far-flung future of 20XX, robotics have advanced tremendously and the world government has reformed, using mechanical labor to provide for human needs. A new peace has prevailed thanks to the absence of armed combat. But like most peaces in the worlds of video games, it is not to last. Dr. White

made a group of robots called the Mighty Numbers to compete in public robot battle competitions, but during a fight, the robots are suddenly infected with a virus that makes them incredible threats to humankind. Beck, the ninth of the Mighty Numbers and the only one to escape infection, must now suppress his mechanical siblings in the enemy- and obstacle-laden levels they have assumed control of.

IF YOU'VE EVER PLAYED A MEGA MAN, YOU'LL BE RIGHT AT HOME WITH MIGHTY NO. 9

If you've ever played a Mega Man game at some point in your life, you'll be right at home with the basic concepts at play in Mighty No. 9. Running, jumping, dashing, and shooting will help Beck make his way across the hazardous levels where his kin now rule the roost. It's not easy, either: look for old-school classics like insta-kill spikes and flying enemies that send you careening into pits to make an epic

comeback. Mega Man's unique ability was copying the skills of defeated bosses for his own use, but Mighty No. 9 takes this idea a few steps further. All robots in this universe are made up of cube-like components called Xel. While Beck can still use the powers of his fallen family members, he can also augment these powers by dashing into weakened enemies and absorbing their Xel. These reward him with numerous useful combat abilities, such as piercing shots and additional damage.

Mighty No. 9 is shaping up to be a fine title to please both classic Mega Man and 2D platforming fans. With the game's release coming soon, Keiji Inafune has started up a second crowdfunded project with anime production house Studio 4C - an anime series and game inspired by the famously cancelled Mega Man Legends series called Red Ash. It sure seems like a good time to be a Mega Man fan... even if you're not getting Mega Man by name. **»**

PLATFORM: PS4/PC/XBox One/Wii U / CATEGORY: 2D Platformer / DEVELOPER: Comcept/Inti Creates / PUBLISHER: Deep Silver / DUE: September 2015



MASTER OF ORION

ANDREW WHITEHEAD FEELS BAD FOR BEING SO EXCITED ABOUT SO MANY UPCOMING REBOOTS



» So this one came out of nowhere. Arguably the finest galaxy-conquering simulator ever made, Master of Orion is back and looking better than ever after more than a decade long absence.

Right off the bat Jacob Beucler, director of global operations at Wargaming, made it clear how much his team and developer NGD Studios love the first two Master of Orion games, and that they all pretend that the third game never happened – a statement that should definitely please diehard fans.

Another surprise was that despite being published by free-to-play powerhouse Wargaming, this is a regular full-price retail release and not a micro-transaction based browser game or anything weird. "You won't have to pay per turn," joked Beucler.

WHERE TO START >> For the uninitiated, Master of Orion is the grandfather of the 4X genre where your path to victory is tied to your ability to eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate. Explore the galaxy, expand your empire, exploit people and resources, and exterminate whoever stands in your way.

Every new game starts with you choosing one of 10 races which fans will recognise instantly from the original game while also probably noticing that that's three less than the second game.

"This game has all the original races," said Beucler, "we'll get that down first and look at the Master of Orion 2 stuff later."

Races have their own abilities, strengths and weaknesses – for example Humans are expert negotiators while

the mechanical Meklar race can survive on toxic planets. For this particular demo we were shown the Alkari, a bird-like race that feature expert pilots and but also hate planets with high gravity.

What fans loved about Master of Orion is the different ways you can achieve victory. There's the classic enemy eradication route, but there's other options such as a technological victory that you gain through research, an excellence victory you get by being elected the supreme galactic ruler, an economic victory for getting really rich and a diplomatic victory for playing nice with all your space friends.

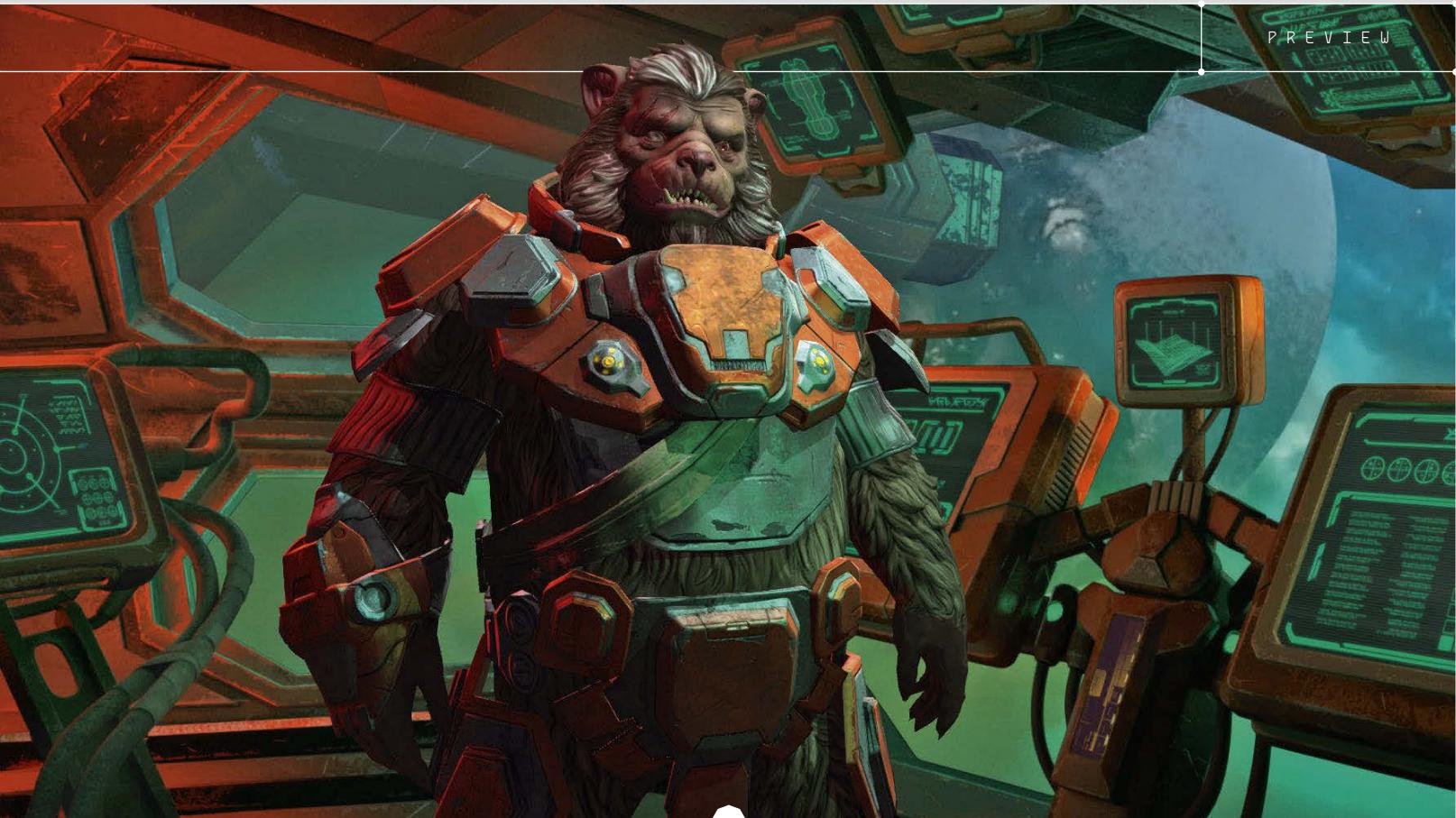
How each of these can be achieved is too complicated to get into now, but the point is that to win you're going to have to play smart, not just aggressive. Plus you've got 500 turns to claim victory and if you're absolutely on fire in one game you can win in all five ways at once.

"If you wanted to play a really quick game of Master of Orion, and you're really good at it, it's going to be a two hour game," said Beucler. "The first really big game I played on here though took me about 10 and a half hours, and that was me trying to do it all."

The first time you play any 4X game you're going to be overwhelmed, and frankly back in the 90s games weren't designed to hold your hand. But there's no reason to continue that tradition so the new Master of Orion is all about accessibility.

"What we're doing with [Master of Orion] is not making it less complex but more accessible," explained Beucler. "Look at it this way, when we did World of Tanks on the Xbox 360 we heard 'you're just going to dumb it down to work on a console'. And no, we didn't."

PLATFORM: PC /
CATEGORY: 4X strategy /
DEVELOPER: NGD Studios /
PUBLISHER: Wargaming /
DUE: TBD



Lens flare off the starboard bow, sir! It's a big one!

"[We are] actively making decisions to reinforce the hardcore but also allow the game to be accessible to new users born after 1993."

Watching the demo closely the user interface, to my eyes at least, looked just like it did back in Master of Orion 2 but with a cleaner and more streamlined design. Getting into the action, Beucler launched a scout ship his home planet and headed toward the nearest star. Suddenly half way to its destination an anomaly was discovered.

Keeping the scout on its original path a frigate was then launched to investigate this new mystery and discovered the remanets of a ship that was home to a couple of hundred credits.

Earning credits is vital to victory and is done by collecting taxes and trading with other races as you discover them on your journey to galactic domination. Both of these income streams need careful management as

■ A SUPERNOVA IS A WORLD-ENDING EVENT. IF IT HAPPENS TO YOUR HOMeworld, IT'S A REAL BUMMER ■

you don't want to piss off your own people, nor do you want to give too much or receive too little from another empire that could become your enemy in a very short space of time.

One element making a very welcome return is the Galactic News Network and their humorous observations. It's easy to forget that for all the seriousness of the gameplay these games also had many lighter moments that help lighten the mood when you're dealing with planet ending armadas threatening your homeworld.

"They're going to report on silly stuff, but they also report on real-time events," said Beucler. "So right now

they're talking about a supernova which is a world-ending event. If it happens to your homeworld that's a real bummer [and they'll report that]."

I've always had a lot of respect for how Wargaming handles their properties so I wasn't surprised to see them do the right thing with this much-loved series.

"I can tell you that for the president of our company Victor Kislyi the original is one of his favourite games of all-time," said Beucler. "So when the [Master of Orion license] came up he bought it. He bought it so he can bring it back and deliver that same experience again."

You always want to have your critical eyes wide-open during previews but it's hard to not be genuinely excited by this game. Master of Orion, the 4X series certain gamers still talk about like it's the Citizen Kane of gaming, is coming back and looks set to be absolutely brilliant.

Get hype, humans. ■

STREET FIGHTER V

HERE COMES A NEW HEIDI KEMPS

It's hard to believe Street Fighter IV hit arcades a whole seven years ago. It certainly doesn't seem like so much time has passed - but perhaps the multiple upgrades and iterations to the game that have released since have something to do with that. The effect of SFIV on the industry since its release, however, has been profound. The fighting game genre has been completely revitalized, massive global tournaments are being held regularly, and well-known players have become recognized names

throughout gaming culture. Capcom themselves have since fully grasped the value of the fighting game community, sponsoring their own series of events (the Capcom Pro Tour) around the globe and offering up a \$500,000 USD prize pot for the victors.

It's a tremendous turnaround from the fringe status of the genre ten years ago, and it's all been spearheaded primarily by a modern Street Fighter game. Now, Capcom aims to keep that momentum strong with Street Fighter V for PlayStation 4 and PC. It's still in an extremely early condition - Capcom likes to carefully dole out information on characters and game elements to keep its fan faithful hungry for new information - but it's clear that Street Fighter V is going to shake things up just as much as SFIV did upon its release.

Even at this early stage, Capcom has made it clear that Street Fighter V is going to be much more than just another batch of new characters and balance adjustments.

Several of the core gameplay systems in SFIV, such as Focus Attacks and Ultra Combos, have already been completely discarded. In their place are a series of systems called "Variables." Each character in the game has three types of variables: a V-Skill activated by pressing medium punch and medium kick together (the old Focus Attack command from SFIV), a V-Trigger utilized with hard punch and hard kick pressed in tandem, and V-Reversals, a unique command for each character. The variable skills utilize and affect a meter separate from the standard super meter, appropriately called the "V-meter." This replaces the revenge meter from SFIV, leaving only the standard super meter to do EX moves and super moves, called "Critical Arts" in this game. While your super meter fills up faster than in SFIV, not having Ultras available to pull out when you're doing poorly makes meter management a more strategic affair.

Damage and overall gameplay speed have been increased noticeably over SFIV, as well. When you block attacks - even normal ones - you'll see a bit of life in your gauge flicker. As long as you're not taking damage, that flickering life will heal, but if you screw up your guard and get hit then you're going to lose that health as well. Thankfully, chip damage can no longer cause a KO in SFV, unless it comes from a Critical Art. There's also the welcome return of the stun meter from Street Fighter III Third Strike, which lets you know how close your character is to the dreaded dizzy state.

Thus far, six characters have been revealed. There are the Street Fighter stalwarts, Ryu and Chun Li, two characters who have come to represent



PLATFORM: PS4/PC
CATEGORY: Fighting /
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DUE: SPRING 2016



the franchise across all manner of media. Prominent series antagonist M. Bison also takes the stage, looking older but no less imposing and ferocious. Cammy, another beloved series femme fatale, has also been confirmed to make her return to the arena, and – in a nod to hardcore fans – is dressed in a new outfit inspired by the Dreamcast shooter title Cannon Spike.

Returning to the series after a long absence are two characters from the Street Fighter Alpha sub-series: Charlie Nash and Birdie. Both have changed in appearance significantly since their last outing: Nash, once believed dead, has quite clearly been through some manner of terrible physical transformation, with parts of his body looking discolored and sewn together. The chain-wielding, grappling punk Birdie, meanwhile, appears to have let himself go after all these years, sporting a prominent beer belly and taste for... well, everything edible.

■ DAMAGE AND OVERALL GAMEPLAY SPEED HAVE INCREASED OVER SFIV ■

There's a tremendous attention to detail in everything in the game: the character models have been revamped completely, the animations have been touched up and tweaked, and the backgrounds feature elements that change dynamically. Though only two stages have been showcased so far – Hong Kong and London – they both feature elements completely new to the series. Using a super meter-powered move to defeat a foe in the corner of the stage will result in a cinematic finish – in the case of the Hong Kong stage, defeating the opponent in the left side of the stage sends them flying through the wall into

a Chinese restaurant, where the battle continues in the next round. In London, KO'ing your opponent with style in the corner will send them slumping into a nearby loo. Talk about demeaning!

But it's the Variable skills that really add spice to combat. V-Skills don't consume meter, but are moves that boost it when used correctly. Ryu, for example, has an SFIII-style parry, while Birdie has a food-and-soda-guzzling ability booster. The V-Triggers, which do utilize the V-Meter, are the major game-changers, adding significant boosts to combatants when activated. Chun Li and Cammy's normal strikes, for instance, gain extra speed, power, and combo ability, while Bison gains more range and temporary invincibility during dashes.

What we've seen of Street Fighter V so far is tantalizing, and we haven't even seen any completely new characters yet. Keep your fighting skills sharp, folks – when Spring 2016 rolls around, it's time to hit the streets again. ■

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TRI FORCE HEROES

ANDREW WHITEHEAD IS DESPERATELY TRYING TO WORK OUT WHERE THIS FITS IN THE ZELDA TIMELINE

It's been a while since we've had multiple Links working together in a Legend of Zelda game, but then again it's not exactly a series that easily lends itself to multiplayer adventures either. So it came as some surprise to me that I enjoyed my time with Tri Force Heroes as much as I did.

First things first though - the game is playable in single-player, with players being able to swap between Link and two other "dול" characters. But it's with other human players where the game shines.

Multiplayer is strictly three players, so if one drops out the other two can save their game before being forcibly kicked out. On the plus side the game does support download play so you can enjoy the game with two friends and just one cartridge - but it's still one or three players and that's it. Adding to team focus, players are tied together with a shared health bar that kills everyone when depleted.

When sitting in the same room and playing with friends it's easy enough to chat amongst yourselves and work through the puzzles presented to you. But when playing online you'll have to rely on eight pre-set icons to convey your thoughts.

The rationale behind this is if it's your first time in a dungeon and someone else's tenth you don't want them just telling you what to do. So instead your fellow adventurers can encourage rather than simply explain things to you.

It's all a very Nintendo-y way to do multiplayer for sure, but if you can accept the game quirks and all there's a lot of fun to be had with Tri Force Heroes.

■ ■ ■ **LIKE YOUR CLASSIC TOP-DOWN ZELDA GAME BUT WITH A GREATER FOCUS ON PROBLEM SOLVING ■ ■ ■**

At the beginning of my hands on time my two companions and I were first asked to choose a costume which, aside from the cosmetic differences, gave us powers like larger bombs and better spin attacks. We then dived in with two of us picking up Gust Jars while the other grabbed bombs.

The game plays like your classic top-down Zelda game but with a greater focus on problem solving.

For example at one point our bomb carrying Link had to throw a bomb to me over a pit so I could catch it and throw it to the next player before it exploded so they could clear a path. What made us laugh were the hot potato moments of catching and getting rid of the bomb while also knowing each time we screwed up we'd all pay the price.

Like explaining a joke, trying to explain what makes puzzles fun is futile, you'll have to see them for yourself, but I can attest to the fact that all of us had a pretty good time trying to work out what to do and how to do it.

Overall it feels like 3DS owners have had a good run with Zelda games - two solid remakes and the brilliant Link Between Worlds - and it looks set to continue with Tri Force Heroes. ■ ■ ■



PLATFORM: Nintendo 3DS / CATEGORY: Puzzle adventure / DEVELOPER: Nintendo EAD Group No. 3 / PUBLISHER: Nintendo / DUE: Late 2015



SUPER MARIO MAKER

ANDREW WHITEHEAD JUST WANTS TO WATCH WORLD 1-1 BURN

Nintendo haven't had a huge 2015 so far, especially with Zelda Wii U now in hiding until 2016, so now it falls to Super Mario Maker to keep the home fires burning. Thankfully, and somewhat surprisingly, this user-driven platformer is more than up to the task.

Featuring tile-sets from the original Super Mario Bros., Super Mario Bros. 3, Super Mario World and the more recent New Super Mario Bros. U, Super Mario Maker is a big Mushroom Kingdom themed sandbox for creating and sharing your own Mario stages with a few unique twists.

Making levels is super easy on the Wii U touchscreen, and even placing warp-pipes that lead to separate areas took a less than a minute for me to work out. There are lots of little Nintendo-y additions too, like shaking a Koopa before placing it in the play area changes it from a green shell to a red shell, and feeding enemies mushrooms turns them into giant versions of themselves.

You can road-test your level with the press of a button and whenever you die in creation mode the game pauses and shows a trail

of where Mario has been to help you understand where your jumps are landing and aid in working out platform placement.

At any point you can easily switch between the four graphical styles, which also changes the physics to match the chosen game, so you can have wall-jumps in Super Mario Bros. U or the unforgiving momentum of the original Super Mario Bros.

PLAYERS CAN TRANSFORM INTO CLASSIC CHARACTERS LIKE LINK FROM THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

In addition to that enemies who appear in later games have been reworked in previous games art style – for example the yellow caterpillar Wiggler from the 16-bit Super Mario World can appear as an 8-bit version of itself in Super Mario Bros.

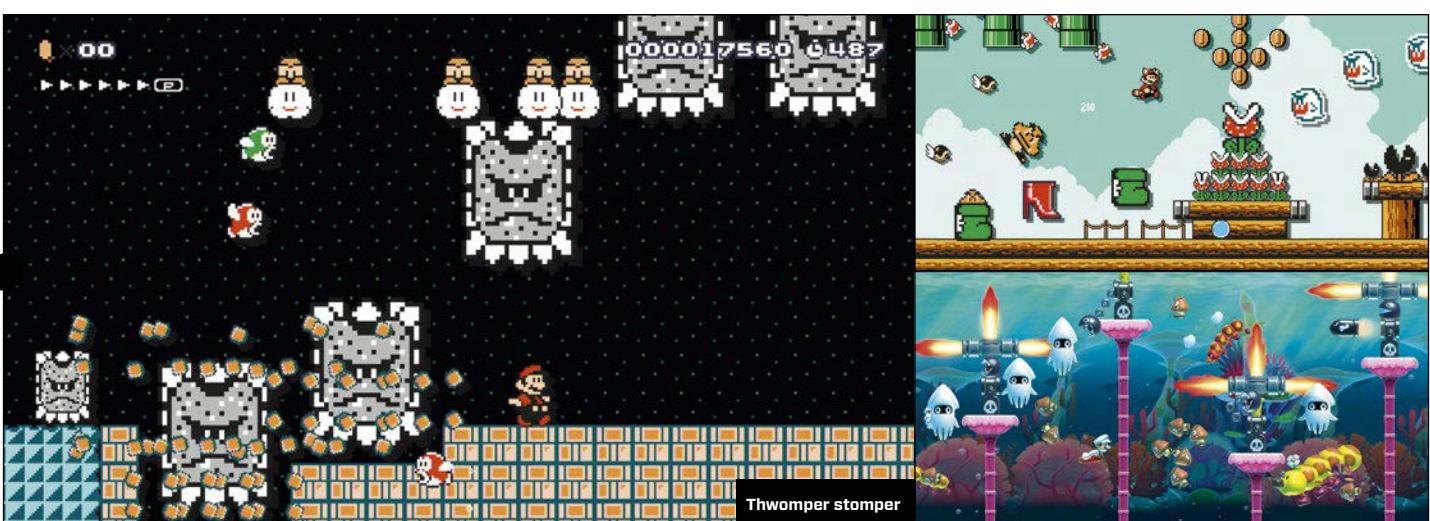
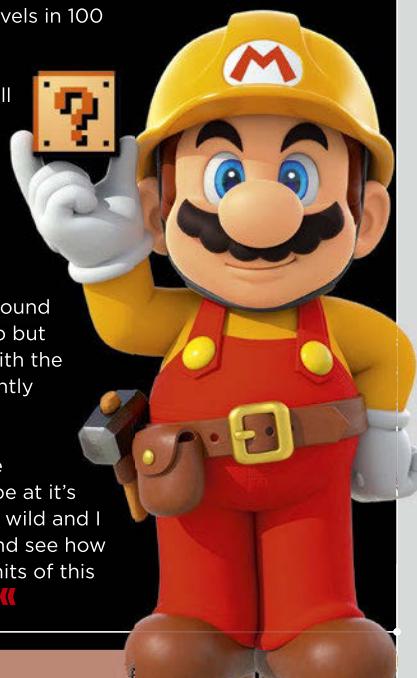
Another new feature that is sure to please the fanboys (myself included) is a new power-up that can only be used in the original Super Mario Bros. style – the

Mystery Mushroom. This unique fungus allows the player to transform into other pixelated versions of classic characters, such as Link from the original Legend of Zelda or even the Wii Fit Trainer. These costumes are unlocked with either an Amiibo or by beating a mode called the 100 Mario Challenge that has players trying to complete randomly chosen user and Nintendo created levels in 100 lives or less.

What makes Super Mario Maker work so well is both how limiting and freeing it is. Unlike other sandbox creation games this one is focused solely on a very specific 2D platformer franchise, but by giving gamers a familiar playground to work in you can't help but feel instantly at home with the great controls and instantly recognisable cast.

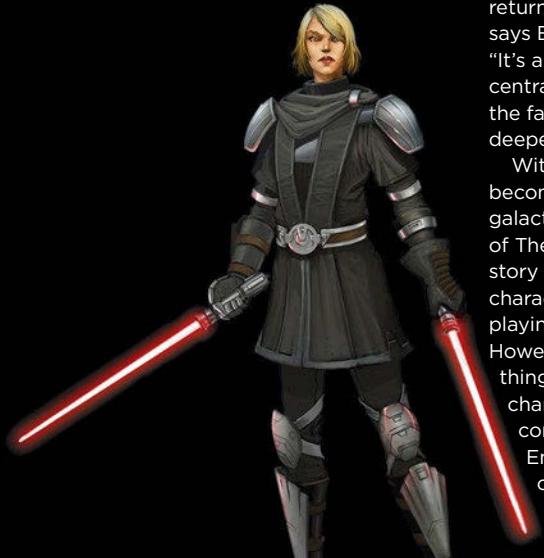
Of course like any community driven game Super Mario Maker will be at its best when it's out in the wild and I cannot wait to dive in and see how far fans can push the limits of this now 30-year-old series. ■

PLATFORM: Wii U / CATEGORY: User-created platformer / DEVELOPER: Nintendo EAD Group No. 4 / PUBLISHER: Nintendo / DUE: September 11, 2015



STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

HEIDI KEMPS MADE THE KESSEL
RUN IN LESS THAN 12 PARSECS



PLATFORM: PC
CATEGORY: MMORPG /
DEVELOPER: Bioware
PUBLISHER: EA
DUE: OCTOBER

Star Wars: Battlefront and Disney Infinity 3.0 may have been the biggest Star Wars-related titles shown this summer, but Bioware Austin and EA certainly haven't forgotten the folks who have been ensconced in the faraway galaxy of MMORPGs. Star Wars: The Old Republic has transformed a fair bit since its original launch, going from strictly subscription-based to a combination of subscription and free-to-play business model and offering numerous expansion packs each year with new content. Even so, it's never quite lived up to its initial promise of being a heavily story-driven MMORPG with the distinct Bioware flare that millions have come to love in the developer's non-MMO titles. With the release of Knights of the Fallen Empire, that changes.

"Knights of the Fallen Empire is a return to our Bioware storytelling roots," says Bruce MacLean, senior producer. "It's a Star Wars epic where you are the central hero and your choices determine the fate of the galaxy. It offers players a deeper and more personal story arc."

Within this episodic story arc, you become the Outlander, a legendary galactic hero. If you're an existing player of The Old Republic, the Outlander story is a continuation of the individual character story you've already been playing through for all this time. However, if you're new to the whole thing, you can create a fresh level 60 character and leap straight into the content of Knights of the Fallen Empire. (However, if you create a character this way, you can't go

back and play the older class story, since the game flags you as having already completed it.)

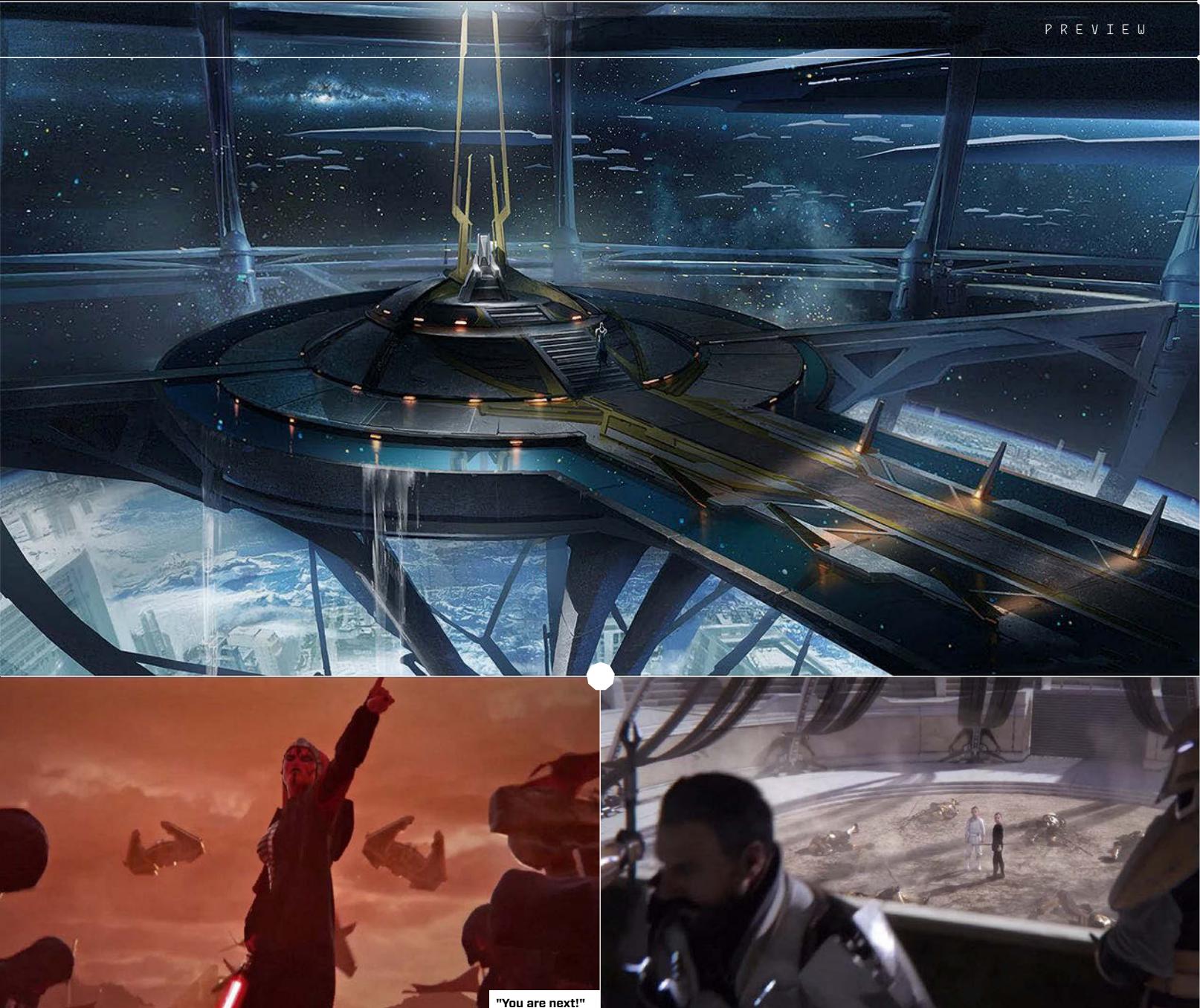
The first nine chapters of the story will be available when the game launches, while the rest will come later on a regular release schedule. "[The great thing about episodic chapters] is a cinematic, action-packed role-playing experience, thick with plot twists, surprises, betrayals, redemptions, and hard choices," notes MacLean. "We're very excited to be releasing this in a year that is bringing us the next great Star Wars movie, building on the legacy of Knights of the Old Republic, and fulfilling player requests for another deep Bioware RPG." This story is generally a single-player experience, though it will have effects on the main MMO.

The expansion begins with an in-game cinematic. Your character, who has been placed in carbonite stasis, is given a rather rude reawakening by Sith fighter Lana Beniko. She's one of five new companions in the game, each of whom has their own personalities and storylines. You don't have time to catch your bearings, however – the enemy is at hand, and you're going to have to fight your way out.

It turns out that years have passed, and the Galactic Republic and the Sith Empire have both been pushed to the brink of defeat by a new force called the Eternal Empire. With the survival of both factions in jeopardy, formerly hostile individuals have become strange bedfellows, united against this oppressive new enemy.

Our demo showcased some of the action that takes place shortly afterwards. Our unusual team of heroes





"You are next!"

was making their way through a bustling city where a Sun Generator had begun to overload. We were immediately faced with a tough choice: risking our lives to stay around longer and try to quell the reactor – even with countless enemy forces breathing down our necks – or fleeing and leaving millions to potentially perish as the generator goes into meltdown. NPCs in the game remember vital choices like these, and there are far-reaching consequences to every decision you make.

We decided to let the reactor run amok and distract our pursuers. It also took out the power to our surroundings as it flared up. We were set upon by new enemies, the Sky Troopers, as we proceeded to make our escape. Sky Troopers are relentless droids who will stop at nothing to impede our team of heroes, though our adept fighting skills helped take them down before they could cause too much trouble.

Eventually, our escape route was

THE REPUBLIC AND THE SITH HAVE BEEN PUSHED TO THE BRINK OF DEFEAT BY THE ETERNAL EMPIRE

blocked by a pair of Force Knights. We attempted a Force Persuasion to let us pass uneventfully – which failed miserably – and were dragged into a fight with the duo. After taking them down, we were given the option to let them go or kill one of them. We opted to let them go, to the snide disapproval of Lana. However, MacLean pointed out, the possibility exists that we could encounter these characters again in the future, and they would remember the mercy we took on them. Had we not spared him, his partner may have come back to hunt us down again later.

The game will offer more than just new places and new faces, however. The

level cap has been increased to 65, and with that comes new abilities that are “iconic,” in the words of Bioware. We didn’t get to see these skills in action with our pre-made Level 60 Outlander, but details will likely be forthcoming at a later date. “The general philosophy [behind development of the new skills] is to increase mobility and deliver action-packed combat,” says MacLean. You’ll be able to go back to places and content that existed before the expansion, as well, and there will be some new surprises waiting – though details on those were kept vague.

Knights of the Fallen Empire will be delivered as a free expansion to current subscribers this October, with further episodes to release from early 2016 onwards. If you’re a veteran player of TOR, you’re no doubt champing at the bit with excitement over this new expansion already, but if you’ve never ventured into this MMO before, well – there’s plenty of time to give it a go before this expansion hits! **K**

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

ANDREW WHITEHEAD FORGOT TO REINFORCE THE WALLS AND COST HIS TEAM THE ROUND

Having spent some quality time with Rainbow Six Siege last year and walking away thoroughly impressed I went into this year's demo feeling like I knew what to expect. Even with that knowledge, and in spite of some game ending bugs that come with playing pre-release code, Siege remains one of my most anticipated games of 2015.

For the uninitiated Siege is a five-vs-five tactical shooter that pits the titular Rainbow anti-terrorism team against a group of, you guessed it, terrorists in a close-quarters battle.

Last year's demo showed off the hostage mode where my team tried to rescue a civilian from inside a suburban home in the first half, then switched to keeping the Rainbows at bay in the second half when we switched sides.

This year we played in a more industrial area but our tactics remained the same – fortify our positions as terrorists or search and destroy as counter-terrorists.

The few times I've played Siege it's become clear that most rounds end when everyone on one side is dead. Diffusing bombs or rescuing the hostage is a good alternative but those are secondary objectives when

there are enemies nearby.

In any case the destructibility of the world continues to shine through with players heading to the roof and blasting down into the building or getting up close to a wall and knocking a small hole in it to act as a peephole to ambush enemies. The fragility of your situation is still front-and-centre with friendly fire being a serious issue as well as your own death being only a few bullets away

MORE THAN JUST A TRAINING MODE, SINGLE-PLAYER MISSIONS CAN BE PLAYED IN CO-OP

before you're spectating and waiting for the next round.

This year Ubisoft revealed the 20 classes that will ship with the final game, but only had about half that available for my demo. Classes, or operators as they're known, have a fairly rigid load-out and a special ability. Some are designed for quick demolition, with one wielding a wall-breaking sledgehammer, while other could offer healing or better

fortification options.

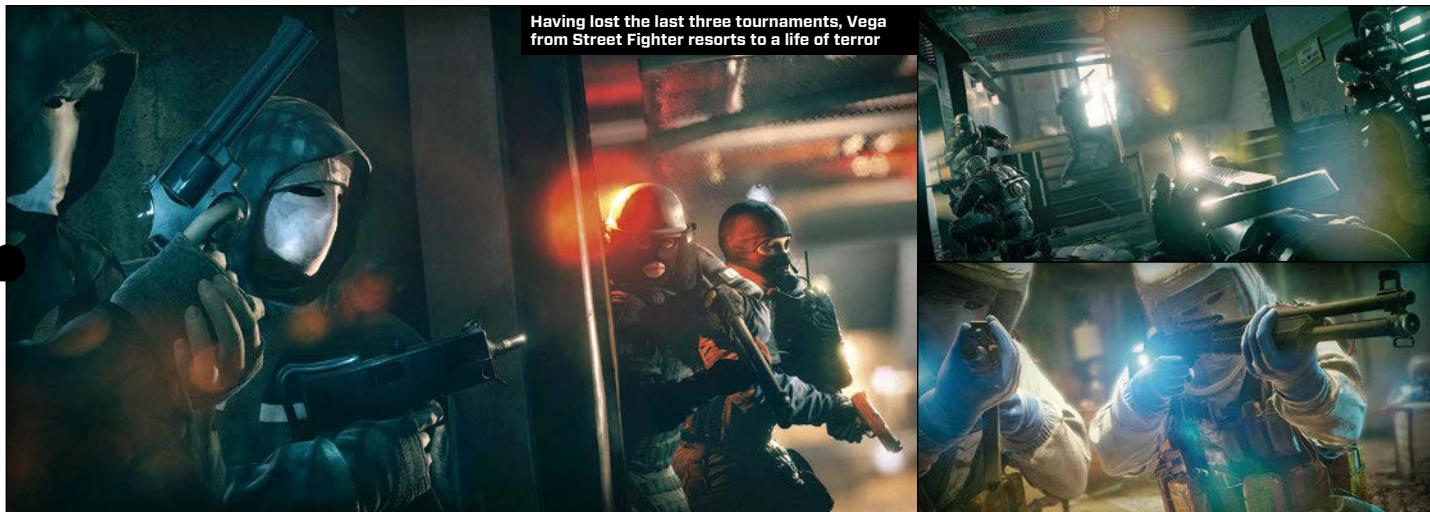
Another new highlight of the game shown off ahead of release is the single-player campaign. Promising to be more than just a multiplayer training mode, the single-player missions, which can also be played in co-op, focus on a terrorist group known as White Mask and their desire to take over the world or something. I mean it's a Tom Clancy game so you know the drill – terrorists, bombs, hostages and networks.

Finally the much-loved Terrorist Hunt mode makes a return and sees groups of players fighting for survival against computer-controlled AI. It's a slightly more relaxed mode to begin with as you must head towards a bomb, defuse it, and then switch to a defensive style of play as enemies rush your location. If you're not having fun in the competitive multiplayer mode working with people in TerroHunt will be a great alternative.

With its great mix of tension, action and you-had-to-be-there moments Rainbow Six Siege continues to impress and is shaping up to be the thinking-man's shooter the market so desperately needs. **KK**



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PC / CATEGORY: Tactical first-person shooter / DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal / PUBLISHER: Ubisoft / DUE: OCTOBER 13, 2015



Having lost the last three tournaments, Vega from Street Fighter resorts to a life of terror

ALEKHINE'S GUN

HEIDI KEMPS IS MORE ABOUT THE ALBIN COUNTERGAMBIT

» The title of Alekhine's Gun is a very clever play on words. The character Alekhine in the game can make use of firearms to eliminate his targets. However, there's another meaning: Alekhine's Gun is also the name of a formation in chess. A fitting metaphor, given that this game takes place during the Cold War between America and the USSR – a tense game of political chess if there ever was one.

Alekhine's Gun is an original third-person stealth game in the vein of Hitman with a historical fiction slant. Alekhine is a Soviet assassin who has been recruited into the ranks of the CIA during the 1960s.



It's the height of the Red Scare and social unrest within the United States, and the undercurrents of fear aren't unfounded – there's a nuclear standoff happening, and conspiracies are running behind the scenes, including a complex plot that could bring down the United States... and many other global powers.

The game takes place through eleven different time-accurate locales across the US, Europe, and Cuba. Wherever you go, you'll need to complete various missions: finding important documents

and evidence, eliminating specific targets, and staging "accidents" to reduce suspicion. You have numerous means by which to accomplish goals – and not just conventional (and authentic to the time period) weaponry, either: disguises, toxins, and other more subtle means of infiltration and elimination will prove very important. There's no one "correct" way to complete a mission, leaving room for a lot of player experimentation and creativity in accomplishing your objectives. □

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC / CATEGORY: Third Person Stealth / DEVELOPER: Maximum Games / PUBLISHER: Maximum Games / DUE: TBA

PERSONA 4: DANCING ALL NIGHT

HEIDI KEMPS IS ONLY 17

» Congratulations, you and your friends have saved your town from certain destruction at the hands of mythological forces! What do you do next? Well, if you're the Investigation Team from Persona 4, the obvious answer is "DANCE PARTY!" Yes, Persona 4: Dancing All Night is quite a strange spinoff. But that's one of the things Persona fans love so much: how the series can constantly surprise.

If you've heard the soundtracks to the Persona games – and if you haven't, you're definitely missing out – you'll know that the games feature intensely catchy soundtracks by Shoji Meguro. Dancing All Night is a rhythm game centered around this music – several of which have received brand new arrangements especially for this title. It's a surprisingly challenging



music game, too: you use the top, left, and lower portions of the Vita D-pad in tandem with the X, O, and triangle buttons to keep the hot moves coming, which actually takes a fair bit of coordination when the notes are coming fast and furious. The dancers, as you might expect, are characters from Persona 4, several of whom are sporting flashy new duds (and, in Kanji's case, that notorious Speedo).

Of course, it's not a Persona game without a story mode, and this one

focuses on team idol Rise and her protégé, Kanami. In order to rescue the members of her j-pop idol group from the Midnight Stage, you're going to have to dance like your life depends on it... because it probably does. Is it silly? Yes, but Persona's always been a mix of serious and lighthearted scenarios. If anything, this should help make the wait for Persona 5 more bearable. (Yeah, we weren't getting out of this without a Teddie pun.) □



PLATFORM: PS Vita / CATEGORY: Rhythm / DEVELOPER: Atlus / PUBLISHER: Atlus/ Bandai Namco / DUE: Late 2015

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER
BUT I THINK GHOST RECON MIGHT
BE AN ACTION GAME NOW, WRITES
ANDREW WHITEHEAD

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC
CATEGORY: Open-world tactical shooter /
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Paris
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DUE: TBA

I'll admit I was pretty shocked when I first saw Ghost Recon Wildlands and had concerns that somebody had put an action game into my tactical shooter. But after watching a live play through of one long mission it's clear now that Wildlands is still a tactical game at heart, it's just got a few more fun ways to deal with situations when the shit hits the fan.

My demonstration was a hands off one in a dark room where I watched four players explore a sizable chunk of the South American republic of Bolivia. The variety of the terrain was immediately apparent and we were assured this is Ubisoft's biggest open world game ever. Dry salt plains, snowy mountains, lush jungles and sparsely populated towns - graphically the game looks great and it's clear that creating interesting worlds is still Ubisoft's biggest strength.

The demo began with the four Ghosts heading to a meeting point however they could, including speeding across the desert in a four-wheel drive and riding a dirt bike down the side of a mountain. Later in the demo the four players gathered together in a little town where they could show off how alive the world is with both enemies and regular civilians going about their daily lives.

Sometime later the Ghosts team had managed to break into an enemy compound and steal a helicopter that they could use for their primary mission of extracting an informant from an enemy base. Two

players stayed in chopper as the other two parachuted down and snuck in to secure the target. Making their escape in a sedan they came under heavy gunfire and relied on their flying allies to provide covering fire.

Dealing with the changing situations was a definite highlight of the game. Early in their mission all four players adopted a stealthy approach and used distractions and long range attacks to confuse their enemy. Later as their mission turned to hell they relied on their full arsenal and each other to survive and complete the objective. I have no doubt that expert players could execute a flawless stealth mission, but there's also room for an all-action approach.

All that said there's no getting around it, there's Ghost Recon in the title and with that name comes expectations. I've always enjoyed the series but I'm far from a purist so to me Wildlands looks like a solid game that I'm excited to check out. But if it's a highly technical shooter you're after you may be better served by ARMA III.

At the end of the day I can see where Ubisoft were coming from - they either innovate and breathe new life into Ghost Recon or they let it die on the vine. And to be fair, their other shooter Rainbow Six Siege will more than satisfy your tactical action hunger.

So it's probably wise to adjust your expectations and take Ghost Recon Wildlands for what it is - a great looking open-world military shooter that has the potential to be both an unpredictable action movie and thoughtful stealth shooter all at once. ▀



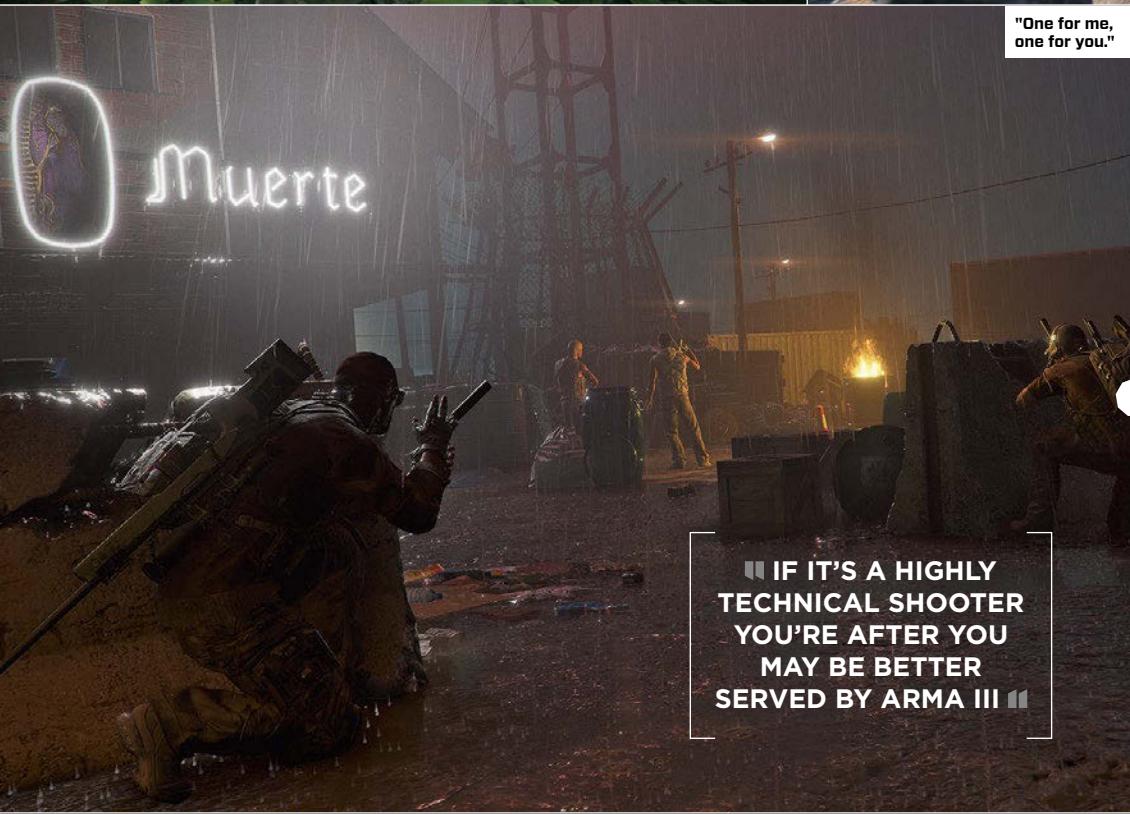


I'M RIDING SOLO

As is the trend with modern games, Ghost Recon Wildlands is presented as an online game, but there is an offline option. Like previous games in the series you can give orders to your three AI buddies, though how they'll fare in a firefight in a world this open remains to be seen.



Not going for a stealth approach, then?



IF IT'S A HIGHLY
TECHNICAL SHOOTER
YOU'RE AFTER YOU
MAY BE BETTER
SERVED BY ARMA III



DISNEY INFINITY 3.0

HEIDI KEMPS IS KEPT IN CRYONIC STORAGE BENEATH CLUB 33



The success of Disney Infinity seems almost like it was a foregone conclusion. Here you have one of the world's biggest media and merchandising empires selling an open-world, open experience game that makes use of beloved characters from all manner of properties that the company controls. But then you add in something Disney undeniably excels at – selling collectible merchandise of its characters – and have that directly affect what you can do in-game. It's no surprise that the game's been a huge hit – and that Disney's gaming division has gone all-in on Infinity. But for all the plastic figures and power discs Disney Infinity has sold to kids (and kids at heart), it's faced a major problem: up until very recently, Disney Infinity has been an amusing toybox. It hasn't been, however, a particularly good game.

That changes with Disney Infinity 3.0. With new playsets and game elements being released – some with very storied developers behind them – the world of Disney Infinity is getting even better.

The biggest push is coming from a galaxy far, far away. Star Wars is being introduced into Disney Infinity in a very big way, with two new playsets being centered on the franchise. *Twilight of the Republic* is the first of these sets, and its focus is the *Clone Wars* saga. The set will include Anakin Skywalker and Ahsoka Tano as figures, and is focused heavily around fast-paced lightsaber combat.

In order to get the feel of flashy lightsaber combat down, Disney has brought storied developer Ninja Theory onboard. You might know them for

some of their previous fast-paced, combat-heavy action games: *Heavenly Sword*, *DmC*, and *Enslaved*. While the company helped a bit in developing combat for the Marvel properties in *Infinity 2.0*, when you hop into *Twilight of the Republic*, battling familiar faces like General Grievous in acrobatic, combo-tastic battles, you know that this expansion is all theirs.

Pure action gaming in Disney Infinity has never felt this exciting – or satisfying – before, thanks to fluid, responsive controls, lag-free execution, and silky-smooth animations that flow naturally into each other. While some players might worry that Ninja Theory might tone down the complexity for a “kids’ game,” our playtime with the set felt every bit as enjoyable as the company’s previous efforts. Since it’s the pack-in for Disney Infinity 3.0, you’ll be a part of the *Clone Wars* right out of the box. (And, if you’re a PS3 or PS4 owner, you’ll also get Boba Fett first as part of a special bundle.)

Rise Against the Empire, which comes packaged with Luke and Princess Leia figures, is the second Star Wars set, focusing on the original trilogy as its settings. This playset, developed by Disney Infinity veterans Avalanche Software and Studio Gobo (with some assistance from Ninja Theory), features a wider variety of setpieces and gameplay types to reflect the epic space battles seen in the films. This means that alongside on-foot fighting and exploration, there will be vehicle-based combat, such as the attack on the Death Star and the battle on the ice planet Hoth. Our demo for this playset featured the Hoth setting, tasking us with taking down the AT-AT by encircling its legs with a long cord. But that’s not all



PLATFORM: Wii U, PS3, PS4, X360, Xbox One, PC, mobile /
CATEGORY: Action/sandbox /
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Software/multi / PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive /
DUE: LATE 2015

CRAZY CROSSOVERS

Disney might have scuttled the Star Wars Expanded Universe when it took over the property, but if Disney Infinity is any indication, they're a-OK with you making your own personal canon within the two Star Wars playsets. Any Star Wars character can be used in either playset at any time, making for some very strange combinations. Ever wanted to have Darth Maul pilot an AT-AT? Well, you're in luck!



Talk to the hand, you must

you can do: by disembarking from the vehicle and flipping the proper switches, you can break film canon and actually take control of the AT-AT for yourself. If you have a second player in tow, you can even have AT-AT battles. It's these sort of creative surprises that have made Disney Infinity so endearing, and seeing them in the Star Wars setting is a real joy.

The Inside Out playset, which includes Anger and Joy figures, rounds out the pack. In this mix of 2D and 3D platforming action, Riley's fallen asleep after watching a scary movie, and now Subconscious is jumbled up. It's up to her headmates to put things back in order. Each of Riley's personified emotions allows for different abilities to be used – Anger can storm through lava, Fear can dash quickly, Sadness can hop on clouds, and so on. Two players can also team up for cooperative play, working together to solve puzzles and clear challenges. Don't have a figure you need to clear

■ STAR WARS IS BEING INTRODUCED INTO DISNEY INFINITY IN A VERY BIG WAY ■

a stage? It's ok – the game will let you "borrow" abilities as necessary.

Rounding out the package are additions to the game's user-generated Toybox mode that expands on its vehicular play. Sumo Digital, the folks behind titles like the Sonic and Sega All-Stars Racing series, have been contracted to build a racing mode, Toybox Speedway, in Disney Infinity. This essentially allows you to play Disney and Star Wars All-Stars Marvel Super Hero Karts within the game. There are three cups and three engine classes to choose from, with tracks themed around the varied franchises seen in-game.

Of course, it wouldn't be the Toybox without some crazy player customization. Using character figures and power discs representing vehicles, you can create some some incredibly amusing combinations. The racing itself felt fantastic – it was fast and frenetic, the drifting and movement was smooth, and all the things we've come to love about good kart racers were present.

The Toybox Takeover is the other addition. Aiming to improve on the Escape from the Kyln Toybox game from 2.0, in Takeover you'll be taking on hordes of famous Disney villains through six levels. It tops off what looks to be a spectacular package that covers numerous gameplay bases (pun not intended).

While a release date for 3.0 hasn't been set in stone yet, it'll be out sometime this fall – just in time for the holidays. Make room on your shelf, because your figure collection's about to get a lot more crowded. ■

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 5

ANDREW WHITEHEAD IS ASHAMED HE OWNS A TONY HAWK: RIDE SKATEBOARD CONTROLLER



PLATFORM: Xbox One, X360, PS4, PS3 / CATEGORY: Arcade skateboarding /
DEVELOPER: Robomodo / PUBLISHER: Activision /
DUE: October 2015 (XBOX ONE, PS4), Q4 2015 (X360, PS3)

Every year a few classic games pulled from history's shelf, dusted off and given the chance to shine again. And if one franchise is in need of such treatment it's the once mighty Tony Hawk's Pro Skater series.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5 is the first proper entry in the series since 2007 and it falls once again to Robomodo to get this right. Granted they haven't had a great track record when it comes to Hawk games, but after some time to re-evaluate the series and work out what works and what doesn't it's hard to not be enthusiastic about the fact that the Birdman is back.

"We looked at all the mechanics from [the first four games]," says lead designer Patrick Dwyer. "And then picked all the ones that helped gameplay out. Some of the flatland nonsense just wasn't needed. It makes the game more complex for newcomers and expert players didn't use it."

For the fifth game (in the main series at least) the rule seems to be anything that slows down the action must be cut, and for good reason - this is a game about forward momentum.

The first little control tweak lets players use a trigger button to accelerate and get your character up to speed quicker. Granted you won't be rocketing along at the touch of a button, but it's a handy feature when you're just trying to collect that pesky VHS tape and need to make a tight jump. It'll also help newcomers get some momentum after every crash.

Easily the biggest control change is the new grind and ground slam mechanic, which allows you to press the grind button while in the air and quickly

rush towards the ground. Basically if you're going to overshoot a rail you can hit a button and snap to it, or alternatively if you can see you're about to miss a jump or one of those damn SKATE letters you've been collecting just hit the button and down you go. You won't magnetically snap to rails, there's still skill involved, but it will cut down on some of the frustration of just missing rails by the smallest of margins.

As mentioned before, flatland tricks are gone, and another feature stripped from the game is the ability to get off the board and walk around or climb over the environment. I don't think too many fans will lament this loss though, I mean it's not like the game ever controlled that well as a platformer anyway.

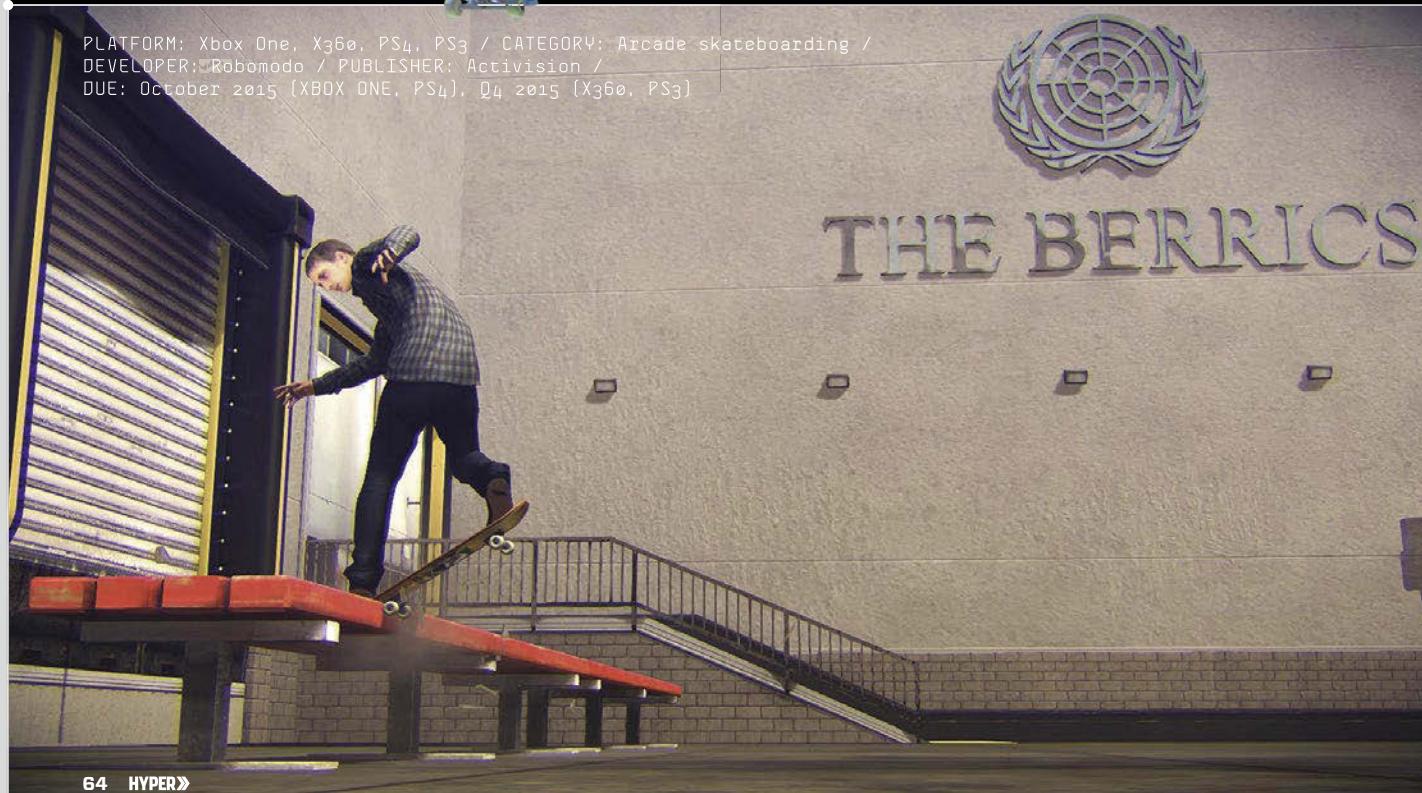
To that effect, the old reliable Special meter now works a bit differently now. Instead of automatically activating when full it can now be triggered when you're ready to use it, so setting up huge combos should be easier.

Putting all of these new features to the test I tried out the game in a stage called the Bunker, which was a mix of the classic Hangar and Warehouse stages. Loving the original three games and sinking way too much time into American Wasteland I felt right at home with Tony Hawk 5. So if you have any love for the series you be pulling off 900s in no time.

My demo was on PlayStation 4 but really, from a graphics standpoint, it wasn't what you'd call next-gen. Don't get me wrong: it's by no means a bad looking game, it's just not pushing any boundaries. Models were stodgily animated, textures blurry, and level geometry painfully simplistic. And the less said about the lighting the better. But look, it doesn't really matter



THE BERRICS





GRINDING SOUNDS

One thing that wasn't being talked about yet despite my questioning is the music, which of course has always been a big part of the Tony Hawk. I was assured the great man himself was heavily involved in song selection, but there was nothing to announce at this time.



DALE MAY

because arguably Tony Hawk was at its best back on the original PlayStation, and that game has not aged particularly well. Plus early retail listings have the game priced lower than your standard new release, so I'm willing to give Robomodo a free pass on this one. Get the controls right and the rest is just gravy.

As simple as the game may be visually, it has at least been modernised in the multiplayer department. You and up to 19 other skaters can be playing in the same park at once and from here you can easily jump into missions and challenges that will scale depending on how many people are working together.

"So take this mission where you have to deliver a bunch of [skate decks] to a pool," Dwyer explains. "You'd start the mission and if it's you alone you may have to do say 50 deliveries to get a 'Sick' score but if it's you and five other people you may have to do 500 decks."

"We're really happy with the fact you could play the whole game with say three people," added Dwyer. "It's great that it

THE RULE SEEMS TO BE ANYTHING THAT SLOWS DOWN THE ACTION MUST BE CUT

scales and you don't have to do all these things by yourself anymore."

One thing that is worth noting is this huge 20-player online mode is a current generation console exclusive. PlayStation 4 and Xbox One gamers can Ollie and grind with a mix of friends and strangers all they want but PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 owners won't have online multiplayer at all. It should also be pointed out that the previous generation console version has been out-sourced to another developer, Disruptive Games.

In happier news the often stupid but always fun Create-A-Park mode has returned and is as you remember it from Tony Hawk games of yore. It's super easy to make your own levels and share them online with a

simple thumbs up or down system that will filter the wheat from the chaff, leaving only the best of the best for you to try. No word on how Robomodo is planning to manage the inevitable deluge of dick-themed levels, but we're sure they've got a censorship system in place. A system, we hope, that'll work a lot better than the hilariously broken one instituted in LEGO Universe.

A few years back Pro Skater HD was meant to be the 'return to form' for a series languishing on the precipice of irrelevance, and frankly it just wasn't. The feel of a Tony Hawk game is very specific and there was something about that game that many critics agreed was just off, and it wasn't just because the soundtrack was total arse.

While I'd have to spend more time with Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5 to know for sure whether it's the Tony Hawk game we've been waiting for, it's certainly feels closer to the last great entry, 2005's American Wasteland, than any of the more recent nonsense to bare his name. Also, we haven't seen a single Barn Magera yet - that has to be a good sign. ■

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MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST

HEIDI KEMPS HAS FAITH



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PS4, PC
CATEGORY: First-person action /
DEVELOPER: DICE
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DUE: FEB 23, 2016

» Guns? We don't need no stinkin' guns.

That might seem like an odd sentiment in a game made by DICE, the folks best known for the *Battlefield* games – which are about as gun-crazy as you can get. But *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*, the highly-clamored-for follow-up to 2008's cult hit, has made that clear in all of its promotional media: not once will heroine Faith ever lay her hands on a firearm. Yes, she could use guns in a limited capacity in the original game, but here? None at all. And that's swell.

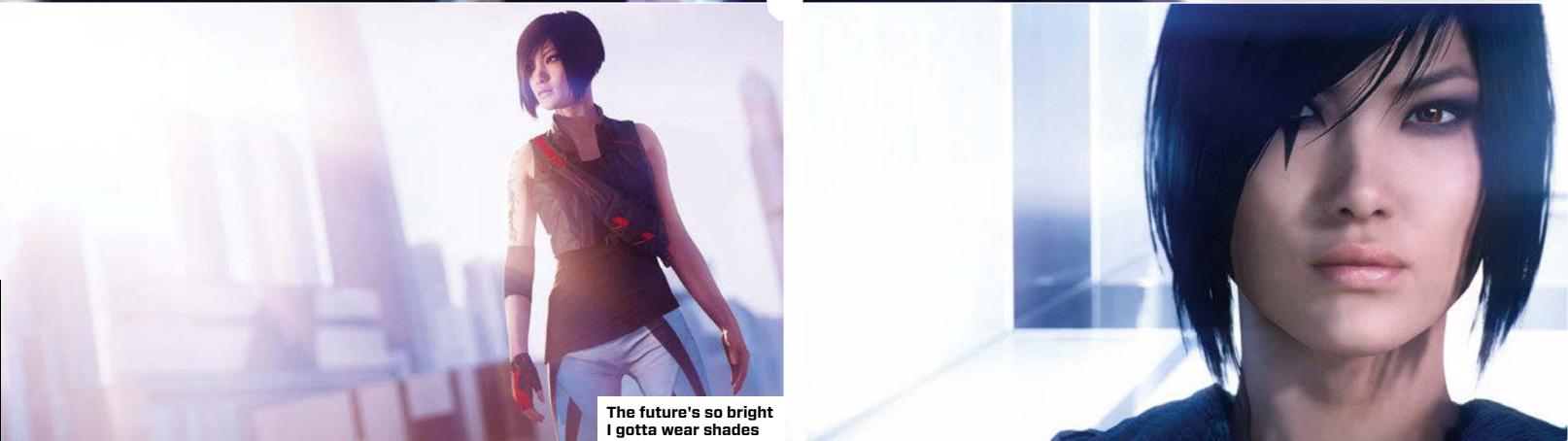
You see, *Mirror's Edge* isn't your typical first person action game. It's not about firefights; instead, it's about the feeling of running, of dashing and jumping, using nimble parkour skills to traverse a futuristic urban landscape. Yes, there are enemies, but that's why Faith knows martial arts. Some swift moves and her oppressors are left reeling.

But there are other changes besides faith's lack of weaponry. The original *Mirror's Edge* (*Catalyst* is actually a prequel) was a delightful but linear experience in a starkly-colored city. *Catalyst*, in contrast, is very different – it's a full-fledged open-world adventure that still looks great, but is stylized in a very different way: bright night lights and gorgeous weather effects rather than stark white buildings with bright red paths trailing across them. The concepts of levels and loading screens are nonexistent – everything here flows as beautifully and seamlessly as Faith flies through her environment.

The world of *Mirror's Edge* is one where governments have been replaced by corporations and people have willingly given up human rights to live within commercially controlled safe havens. Happily consuming propaganda, they live empty lives of submission to their corporate overlords. Yet there are still some who deny this order of things: people called Runners, illicit couriers-of-all-trades: thievery, espionage, and transportation are their primary callings. Faith is one such off-the-grid Runner: though she defies the rule of the Conglomerate she does not engage them head-on. That is, until recklessness on her part puts her in more danger than she's ever faced before.

It's one thing to talk about *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*, it's another to actually see it in action, and still another to actually play it. Being able to explore an open world as Faith is truly eye-opening, especially in the first person perspective. There's no other game out there that so expertly captures a feeling of constant human motion. Rushing, jumping, practically flowing between the structures that make up the city of Glass is an absolute thrill. The combat has been enhanced so that it flows nearly seamlessly into Faith's martial arts strikes. Yet there's a distinct humanity and groundedness to these movements – Faith can do a lot of daring moves, but she never feels more than human. That's what makes it all the more satisfying when you soar from rooftop to rooftop, socking heavily armed guards before they even know what has hit them, all before making another wall climb. ▀





The future's so bright
I gotta wear shades

■ THERE'S NO OTHER
GAME THAT SO
EXPERTLY CAPTURES A
FEELING OF CONSTANT
HUMAN MOTION ■



Hang in there, Faith! Or
else, you know... you'll die



STARFOX ZERO

FOR HEIDI KEMPS, EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

The Wii U version of Starfox has been the subject of much rumor and speculation since it was teased at E3 last year. As a franchise, Starfox is one that doesn't reappear too often: Fox and friends aren't usually as visible as Mario, Link and Kirby. But when one does happen, it's usually something interesting: the original Starfox helped introduce 3D polygon visuals to the masses, Starfox/Lylat Wars 64 was one of the defining moments of the Nintendo 64, and Starfox Adventures was developer Rare's last hurrah on

Nintendo platforms. After a lengthy reprieve - the last all-new game was the rather tepidly received Starfox Command on the original DS in 2006 - Starfox has re-emerged, with fan favorite developer Platinum Games at the development cockpit.

Just how did Platinum and Nintendo come together on Starfox? "Last year at E3, we had a Starfox prototype," explains Yugo Hayashi, the project's director on the Nintendo side. "We had the core of the game done - a third person view on the TV screen and a first-person view on the Wii U gamepad, and gyro controls to aim and shoot. That was just the core gameplay, though. When we started thinking about how to turn that into a full product, we thought about shopping it to an outside developer. Since Starfox is a shooting game with impressive visuals, Platinum just seemed like a really good fit."

"Shooting games are kind of a foundational genre for videogames," says Yusuke Hashimoto, the director from Platinum Games. "It's a simple, intuitive idea. I've never

done a shooting game before, but that's part of the reason why I'm really excited about this project."

Starfox Zero is a rather unique concept for Nintendo - it's a game that revisits the setting, characters, and story of the original Starfox on SNES. It's not an enhanced remake like Starfox 64 3D, however - it's a full-on reimagining from the ground up. Since the game covers the beginning of the Starfox saga, however, some fan-favorite characters from later games like Crystal won't make it in, while others like Kat and the Star Wolf team might appear in a story capacity.

When asked about why the team decided on revisiting the original Starfox, Hayashi explained the reasoning. "Starfox has a unique setting - it's spacefaring science fiction with animal characters. In order to re-acquaint people with the characters and setting, we wanted to start again from 'zero,' so to speak."

What sort of abilities, both new and adapted from previous games, will we be seeing in Starfox Zero? "Well, you won't be able to move around on foot, like in Adventures and Assault," says Hashimoto. "However, the Arwing can turn into a walker and operate on land anytime you want. That extends to the other vehicles - there's a flying form of the Land Master, and another new vehicle, the helicopter-like Gyrowing, features a mini robot you can control via first-person view on the Wii U GamePad. Rather than just taking elements from previous games, we're working to introduce new features."

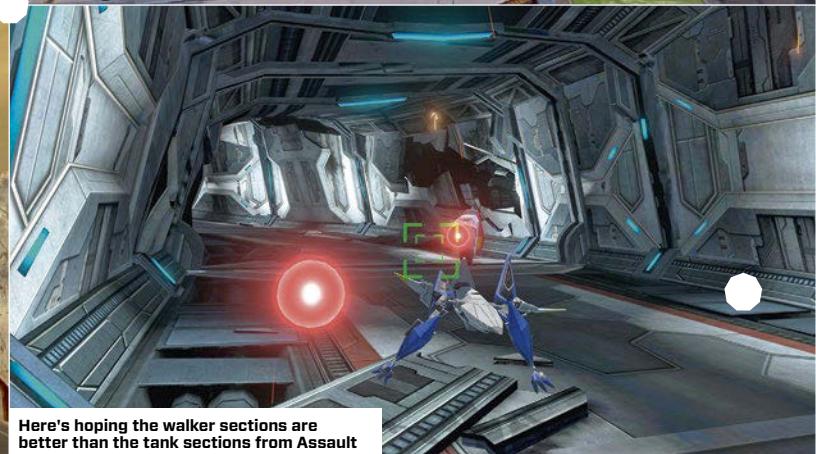
The GamePad is a crucial element of Starfox Zero's design. Aiming and controlling the vehicles is accomplished through the Gamepad's gyro controls.

PLATFORM: Wii U / CATEGORY: Action/Shooting / DEVELOPER: Platinum Games / PUBLISHER: Nintendo / DUE: TBA 2016



OUT OF THIS DIMENSION

One of the most bizarre easter eggs in the original *Starfox* is a hidden stage where you fight paper airplanes and a giant slot machine boss. We asked if this is on the table to be recreated in *Starfox Zero*. “I did kind of want to put that in, but then we’re just doing things that have been done before. However, there will be kind of.. ‘interesting’ stages you can look forward to,” promises Hashimoto.



Here's hoping the walker sections are better than the tank sections from *Assault*

It sounds like it might be awkward at first – and it is a bit, initially – but it soon becomes second nature, much like the gyro aiming in the recent *Splatoon*. After you play with it for a while, you begin to wonder how you got along without it. Rather than allowing the player to switch between cockpit and third-person view like the original did, the GamePad acts as the first-person perspective – all you need to do to get a clearer, close-in view of the action is to look down. The mini robot mentioned above, which is operated strictly via the GamePad, can go into small, enclosed spaces that the bigger crafts cannot.

Like other games in the series – and other Platinum titles – *Starfox Zero* has a strong emphasis on replayability. Each planet will offer multiple missions and objectives for the player to challenge and re-challenge for high scores. Branching paths will determine your progression through the game, though we are told there might not be

THE ARWING CAN TURN INTO A WALKER AND OPERATE ON LAND ANYTIME YOU WANT

“quite as many” branches as previous *Starfox* titles, since the emphasis is more on having multiple missions on the same planets. By playing through missions using different vehicles or vehicle combination

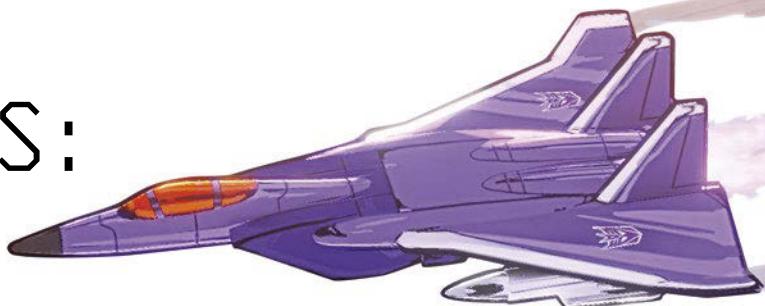
The game also features a co-op multiplayer mode – a first for the series – but perhaps not in the way you might expect. “One person will handle the flying, while the other will use the gamepad for shooting” as Hashimoto describes it. “For example, if you had a kid who couldn’t really handle flying and shooting at the same time, a parent or older sibling could help out.”

But why no competitive multiplayer?

“We really wanted to focus on the unique experience the GamePad delivers... using the two screens in some sort of multiplayer mode would be really difficult to implement. We’re running both screens at 60 FPS, so we decided it would be best just to really put emphasis on the single player experience.”

One thing I had to ask as I wrapped up the interview – were the devs aware of *Starfox*’s legacy of internet memes outside of Japan? “I had no idea,” says Hayashi. “I was pretty surprised. You might have seen in the E3 trailer that Peppy says ‘do a barrel roll!’ before the title splash. I was like, why is that in there? It makes no sense in context! Then they told me people loved that line, so we had to put it in. But you know what’s really cool – since we’re using advanced 3D sound from both the TV and GamePad, you’ll be able to hear all those great lines in a unique new way!”

TRANSFORMERS: DEVASTATION



SO IT TURNS OUT BUMBLEBEE DOESN'T TOTALLY SUCK. WRITES ANDREW WHITEHEAD

After a barrage of terrible movies and mediocre games the robots in disguise need a reprieve – and Transformers: Devastation looks set to be it. Developed by Platinum Games, the kings of the character-action genre, Devastation has the classic visual style of the beloved 80s cartoon with extra design elements from the IDW comic book series.

The story begins with our Earth forcibly being turned into a new Cybertron by a mysterious spaceship buried deep underground. And without wanting to sound prejudiced I think we can all assume it's the Decepticons up to their old tricks, right? So naturally the Autobots are on the scene to investigate.

Many veterans of the animated series, such as Peter Cullen and Frank Welker, are providing voice acting while IDW Publishing writer Andy Schmidt is overseeing the story.

Players can control one of five Autobots including Bumblebee, Sideswipe, Wheeljack, Grimlock and of course Optimus Prime, with each having their own feel, such as the nimble Bumblebee being able to slide underneath enemies and attack from behind while Optimus

has a more weighty feel and delivers bigger hits. After a brief tutorial at the beginning of the game where you try each character, players can then choose any of the five playable Autobots and use them for the entire rest of the game.

On the Decepticon front the regulars like Starscream and Megatron will show up at some point but the most impressive seen during the demo was Devastator.

the massive Transformer made up of five smaller Constructicons. This boss battle highlighted the over-the-top nature of the game as we watched Optimus work his way higher and higher to start pounding the hulking giant in the head.

The action is vintage Platinum Games. Dodging at just the right time triggers a Bayonetta-esque slowdown, which proves invaluable when out-numbered, and attacks

can be cancelled mid-stream or
chained together at lightning speed.

Better yet, the act of transforming has been seamlessly integrated into combat with a character like Bumblebee able to switch into car form, ram his target then switch back and keep the combo going.

And in true Platinum Games style, the rules of the real world don't apply here so you can easily launch an enemy into the air and smash them higher in your vehicle form before slamming them back to earth.

Kenji Saito, perhaps best known as the director of Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance, is taking the helm for Devastation and it showed during my hands on time. Subtle visual clues let you know how your combo is progressing and jumping from enemy to enemy was fluid and made battles feel dynamic and kinetic.

Devastation is the Transformers game fans deserve and has me excited again for a franchise I figured would languish until those god-awful movies ceased to be profitable. Here's hoping a decent Power Rangers game is up next. 



PLATFORM: Xbox One/360, PS4/3, PC / CATEGORY: Hack'n'slash action / DEVELOPER: Platinum Games / PUBLISHER: Activision / DUE: 2015



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CUPHEAD

ANDREW WHITEHEAD TRIED TO COME UP WITH A C-U-P JOKE THAT WOULD FIT IN THIS SPACE

Whenever I go to Disneyland I always stop in a little theatre on Main Street and watch the classic Mickey Mouse cartoons from the 20s and 30s. The painstaking animation, brilliant soundtracks, and surreal storylines - I can't get enough of them.

Clearly I'm not the only one who loves this retro style because Studio MDHR's spectacular debut, Cuphead, looks like someone decided to reach inside my brain and make a game just for me. Presentation-wise, the game is flawless - it genuinely feels like an old 30s-era cartoon complete with



a big band sound, occasional film grain and voice acted sound effects.

Thankfully, Cuphead is more than just a pretty face and follows in the recent trend of super-precise platformers with no guesswork needed when it comes to landing jumps or knowing where your shots will hit.

One area I couldn't help but have some minor concerns about was the lack of traditional side-scrolling levels on offer for my demo. Though the developer assured me there would be a few mini-games and

traditional platforming stages I was also informed that boss battles would make up the majority of the game.

While I have faith the developers will create a game filled with unexpected twists and turns, it would have been nice to slow things down and absorb some of the weird world around you.

Really though that's a minor issue and frankly it stems from the fact that Cuphead gets so much right that I just want more of it. And surely that's not a bad thing? 



PLATFORM: Xbox One, PC / CATEGORY: Platformer / DEVELOPER: Studio MDHR / PUBLISHER: Studio MDHR / DUE: 2016

BELOW

EVERYTHING'S HEAVY UNDERGROUND, AND ALSO QUITE DEADLY, WRITES ANDREW WHITEHEAD

It's tricky previewing a game like Below because it's one of those games that doesn't demo well but you know it has great potential. It's a slow burn adventure game that demands you take your time and look before you leap.

The story of the game is intentionally vague - you're a warrior on a remote island working your way lower and lower through increasingly deadly dungeons. Towards what? I don't know yet.

Speaking with the developer he assured me there is a complete narrative vision for the game but that the team doesn't want to give anything away just yet. What's cool is the visual clues pointed out to



me in the game that told the story organically in the world instead of pausing for exposition.

Taking inspiration from Spelunky and Diablo, Below is a top-down adventure game featuring randomly generated layouts and permanent deaths. As you'd expect there's crafting to be done to make spells and items like arrows for your bow, but keeping your shield up and attacking at the right time is key to your survival.

Artistically the game, to me at least, looked like a watercolour painting with even flat surfaces having some visible texture to them. The music is appropriately moody too, helping the already inspired presentation shine.

There's so much left to discover about Below, but I can say with confidence the fundamentals of control and presentation are working, so this may be a journey worth taking, however hard it is. 

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PC / CATEGORY: Rogue-like adventure / DEVELOPER: Capybara Games / PUBLISHER: Capybara Games, Microsoft Studios / DUE: 2015

DRAGON QUEST HEROES: THE WORLD TREE'S WOE AND THE BLIGHT BELOW

HEIDI KEMPS IS TOUGH ON SLIME

If there's one developer that's seemingly everywhere these days, it's Koei-Tecmo's Omega Force team. The creators of the long-running Dynasty Warriors franchise have stumbled upon a formula for success that has transcended its historical-fiction roots. The trademark Warriors gameplay of mashing up massive hordes of foes has been adapted across numerous well-loved franchises like One Piece, Gundam, and even Zelda. But now, it's mixing it up with Japan's most popular game series, Dragon Quest.

You'd be forgiven for having forgotten about Dragon Quest, as it's been a while since we last saw it in English. Dragon Quest Heroes is the first non-smartphone release of a DQ title since 2011's Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2 on DS. While we've been deprived, Japan has seen the release of Dragon Quest X (a rare Wii/Wii U and PC MMORPG), a 3DS remake of Dragon Quest VIII, Theatrhythm Dragon Quest... and now Dragon Quest Heroes. While the Japanese release hits both PS3 and PS4, however, the international version will be PS4-only, owing to the swift adoption rate of the platform abroad.

So how do you go about bringing

a bunch of Dragon Quest characters into a hack-n-slash action game? Since all of the Dragon Quest games aren't connected, Dragon Quest Heroes offers an original tale that's disconnected from the main games. The two main characters are Luceus and Aurora, residents of the idyllic kingdom of Elsaize. Idyllic, that is, until monsters begin running amok. The daring duo, along with several other heroes from across

■ HOW DO YOU BRING
A BUNCH OF DRAGON
QUEST CHARACTERS
INTO A HACK-N-SLASH
ACTION GAME? ■

the franchise, shall work together to quell the tide of beasts!

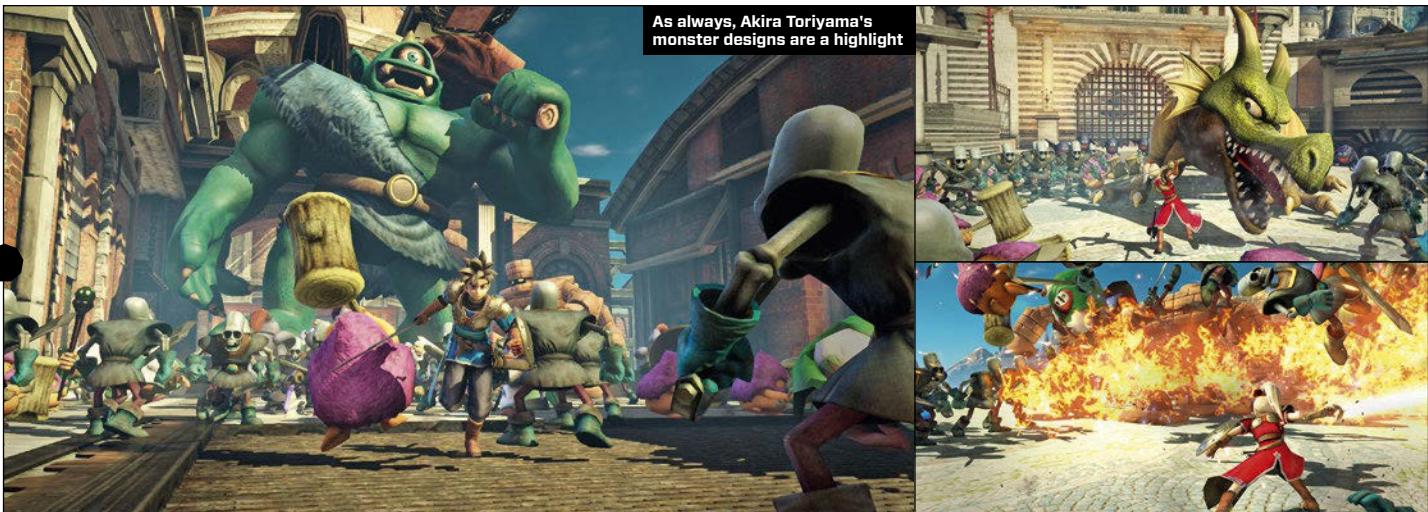
Rather than billing DQH as a straight action game, Square Enix is calling it an action/RPG. Perhaps that's a little bit of a stretch, but DQH is the most RPG-like the Warriors formula has even been. You control a party of four characters and use unique button combos to execute attacks and combos against waves of famed artist Akira Toriyama's

distinct monster designs. By holding down the R1 button, characters can call upon powerful magic and skills to change the tide of battle. Exchanging blows will eventually allow your character to enter a powered-up state - similar to later DQ titles, but in a distinct action context. You'll need to use your skills and your wits against bigger, more dastardly foes, some of whom can't be defeated through conventional means. Felling foes yields rewards: monster coins can be used to summon beasties to your aid, items to plop into the transforming Alchemy Pot, and skill points for enhancing abilities. It's a nice change of pace from the standard Warriors formula, and there are plenty of nice little nods to the original games.

As you'd expect, the game has done quite well in Japan, and Square Enix hopes that the action-fueled gameplay, charming visuals, and next-gen newness of Dragon Quest Heroes will re-re-reinvigorate the franchise abroad. Let's hope so. DQH hits on October 16. ■



PLATFORM: PS3, PS4 / CATEGORY: Action /
DEVELOPER: Omega Force / PUBLISHER: Square Enix / DUE: OCTOBER 2015





LEGO DIMENSIONS

ANDREW WHITEHEAD DOESN'T FOLLOW THE 'SUGGESTED AGE' FOR ANY OF HIS TOYS

So you've seen it's a LEGO game and you've probably made your mind up about it already, and to be fair LEGO Dimensions is primarily made up of the tried-and-true formula. But it does break-free of the usual one note setting and instead embraces the entire universe of LEGO in both the virtual and real world.

In order to play Dimensions you're going to need the starter pack which has the game, three LEGO mini-figs including Batman, Wyldstyle, and Gandalf, plus a copy of the game, a LEGO Batmobile and the all important Gateway.

Much like the Skylander's Portal of Power, the Gateway is where you can place your included LEGO characters and see them appear in game. Underneath all LEGO Dimensions characters and vehicles sits a little disc that keeps track of your characters and their placement on the Gateway.

There's even puzzles in the game that involve changing the colour of characters in the game and moving them to the corresponding area on the Gateway. It's kids stuff for sure, but there were some puzzles that took me a while to work out because of how you have to think of

the real world and the virtual at the same time.

During my demo the developer made it clear that you can play the game easily with just the included characters and never get stuck, but you can unlock more content when you buy new LEGO Dimensions packs.

The physical characters themselves are actually regular LEGO pieces meaning you can pull

(Batman, Gandalf, and Wyldstyle) along with Chell, Scooby-doo and the DeLorean time machine.

Back here in the real world, additional LEGO Dimension packs are sold as either Fun Packs that add characters and vehicles only, or Level Packs that also contain characters and vehicles but also unlock new levels. There's never any crossover with what's included in each pack so you'll never buy the same character twice if you don't want to.

There's some impressive licenses being used here too including The Simpsons, Doctor Who, DC Comics (such as the Joker or Superman), Back to the Future and other big names that adults may actually appreciate more than kids. There's even some visual changes in-game such as the Scooby-doo levels having a slight cel-shading effect.

So yeah, it's a LEGO game, but at least this time it uses real life LEGO. And thanks to the incredible variety you can probably find a Level Pack that even your jaded gamer heart can warm to. **¶**

■ MOST OF MY DEMO WAS SPENT IN THE WORLD OF PORTAL 2 - THE ONE FROM THE VALVE SERIES ■

them off their base and do whatever you want with them. In fact the Batmobile, along with other vehicles you can use in the game, can be remade into a few different shapes that you can then switch to and use in-game as your new setup.

Most of my demo was spent in the world of Portal 2 - and yes I do mean the one from the Valve series. On my Gateway were the three primary heroes of the game



PLATFORM: Xbox One, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Wii U / CATEGORY: Toy driven puzzle-adventure / DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales / PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment / DUE: SEPTEMBER 28, 2015





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DOOM

YURI SPADEFACE'S CAUSE IS JUST, HIS WILL IS STRONG, AND HIS GUN IS VERY, VERY LARGE

Resurrected from the darkest pits of development hell, id Software's latest offering reboots the franchise from the squalor it was left in after Doom 3. Players once again leap inside the Doomguy's boots and take to fighting demons on Mars, using a combination of melee finishers and high-powered weapons, including the returning BFG-9000, and Super Shotgun.

Unlike its predecessors, whose over-the-top gibbing now seems tame and primitive by modern standards, the graphics id has come up with make every exploding enemy burst like rotten fruit. Doom also took a page from the Brutal Doom mod, letting players rip enemies' hearts from their chests and ram said hearts in the enemy's mouth, and beat stunned monsters to death, ripping them apart with a variety of gory animations. The game also allows players to carry multiple weapons via a weapon wheel which slows time when in use, as well as featuring fast-paced movement through the use of vaulting and mantling, and double jumps. There are also 'echo devices', which show replays of what happened in a set area, cluing players in to their objectives, and

the ability to use a corpse's arm to bypass biometric scanners.

Unsurprisingly, Doom has already met its share of controversy regarding its very graphic violence. With sights seen during the game's E3 footage including a chainsaw dismembering demons, and the player-character grabbing a stunned enemy and tearing it in half to reveal its spine, the game is definitely not for all players. Nor

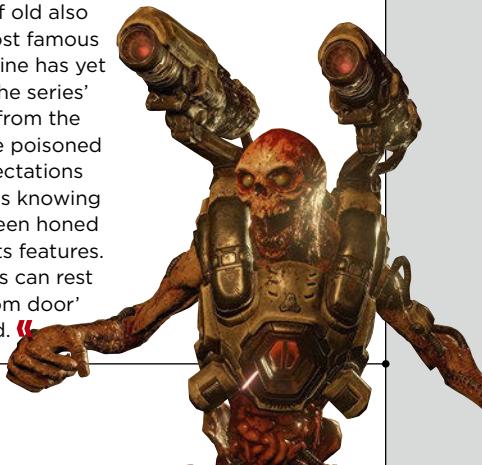
**DOOM HAS
ALREADY ATTRACTED
CONTROVERSY
REGARDING ITS VERY
GRAPHIC VIOLENCE**

would everyone be comfortable with the gory first-person death animations the character can experience. That said, seeing as the original faced controversy for its gutsy gameplay and sometimes satanic imagery, the game's current levels of 'gorn' should surprise no one. In fact, compared to the questionable comic adaptation of the first game, the current iteration of Doom seems sophisticatedly

understated.

Aside from returning to the series' old-school roots by bringing back health and ammo drops, the new Doom will feature mod support across all platforms via Doom Snapmap, an in-built level generator which lets players build their own levels and alter game logic to determine where and when enemies will appear, and create customised maps. It's yet unknown if the game will be as customizable as the first two Doom games, though given that they haven't announced if the current level editor will let players insert custom images and sounds to reskin the game, it seems as though the old Doom's WAD files will remain unsurpassed in customizability in comparison.

The 4x4 deathmatch of old also returns, along with its most famous enemies. While the storyline has yet to be announced, given the series' inspirations clearly stem from the high-octane, testosterone poisoned films of the eighties, expectations are best kept low. Perhaps knowing this, the marketing has been honed in on the gameplay and its features. If nothing else, Doom fans can rest easy that the classic 'Doom door' sound effect has returned. 



PLATFORM: PC, Xbox One, PS4 / CATEGORY: FPS
DEVELOPER: id Software / PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks / DUE: 2016



DISHONORED 2

YURI SPADEFACE NEVER HAD ANY HONOUR TO BEGIN WITH

» Arkane's long-awaited sequel to 2012's Thief-inspired game, Dishonored, was announced at E3. 15 years after the last game, Emily Kaldwin, now 25, is the Empress of Dunwall. However, conflict emerges when an as-yet unknown faction thrusts her from her throne, and she is on the run, an outlaw from her empire. She, along with the previous game's protagonist and her father, Corvo Attano, take to the sunny city of Karnaca, capital of Sarkonis, Corvo's homeland. Both characters will be playable in the game, and voiced, with Corvo retaining his powers from the previous game.

Dishonoured 2 begins with Emily ruling her empire, before an 'otherworldly usurper' drives her out of Dunwall. After an opening sequence which sees players in control of Emily, you then choose if you want to play through the game as either Emily or Corvo. As seen in the trailer, Karnaca is beleaguered by an epidemic, though this time, it's flies and not rats which have infested the city. These flies lay their eggs in corpses, hatching en-masse to assault any passerby. More bodies = more flies, and players can use this to their advantage, which will probably spawn morbidly hilarious

YouTube videos of players throwing infested corpses at guards.

Unlike the previous game, where guards followed pre-set paths, they will band together to search areas, combing the map to find the player. Arkane has hinted that the game has scalable difficulty, making it more punishing for skilful players. Players will also be able to toggle a setting which determines how visible they are when leaning around cover, along

**■ MORE BODIES =
MORE FLIES, AND
PLAYERS CAN USE
THIS TO THEIR
ADVANTAGE ■**

with a potential third way of playing the game, between moving through like a ninja, or carving apart everyone in your way.

Emily and Corvo will be differentiated via their powers; Corvo's abilities will return and be expanded upon, while Emily will have a host of complementary strengths: Far Reach, a grapple ability; Shadow Walk; and Mesmerise, whose function is yet unknown.

Emily will be able to craft bone charms, with over 400,000 available combinations. Powers are upgraded via a skill tree which will allow for customised levelling, as opposed to the previous game's two-step levelling which depended on spending from a limited currency pool to unlock and amplify abilities. This adds an element of replay value, giving players the option to spec Corvo or Emily with different builds tailored to their playstyle.

The combat system will be open-ended to allow for experimentation with the tools available. This will let players find their own paths through the game and become either whirlwinds of death, using their assortment of abilities to play like a supernatural action hero, or being silent as shadows.

The chaos system from the previous game will return, only refined, and with more direct consequences. Hopefully, it won't be like the previous game, where players are given cool toys and told via the game design that killing is wrong, and if they do more than tranquilize or cuddle enemies, that they're evil. «

PLATFORM: PC, PS4, Xbox One / CATEGORY: Stealth-action / DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios / PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks / DUE: 2016



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING URNEST



WE CHAT WITH RIAD CHIKHANI, 19 YEAR OLD ENTREPRENEUR AND FOUNDER OF GAMURS, THE SOCIAL NETWORK FOR GAMERS

» Riad Chikhani has been a gamer for about as long as he can remember. His first clear memory of what would later become his lifelong obsession is of playing Super Mario 64 on the N64 when he was just four years old, and he hasn't looked back since.

"I've been a gamer my whole life," he tells us. "As I went through school, I played almost anything I could get my hands on. Age of Empires, Breath of Fire, Halo 3, Call of Duty, Assassin's Creed, Counter-Strike, Skyrim... the list goes on and on. Then RuneScape took over my life and I played that religiously for about 6 years."

So pronounced was Riad's obsession with Jagex's notoriously addictive free-to-play MMORPG that, at the ripe-old age of 15, he was inspired to create RuneGear: a forum for RuneScape players that quickly amassed over 16,000 members and 5-million pageviews per annum. It was at this point that Riad developed an appreciation for social media's capacity for bringing gamers together and for creating community where none existed before.

Even after he sold RuneGear to concentrate on

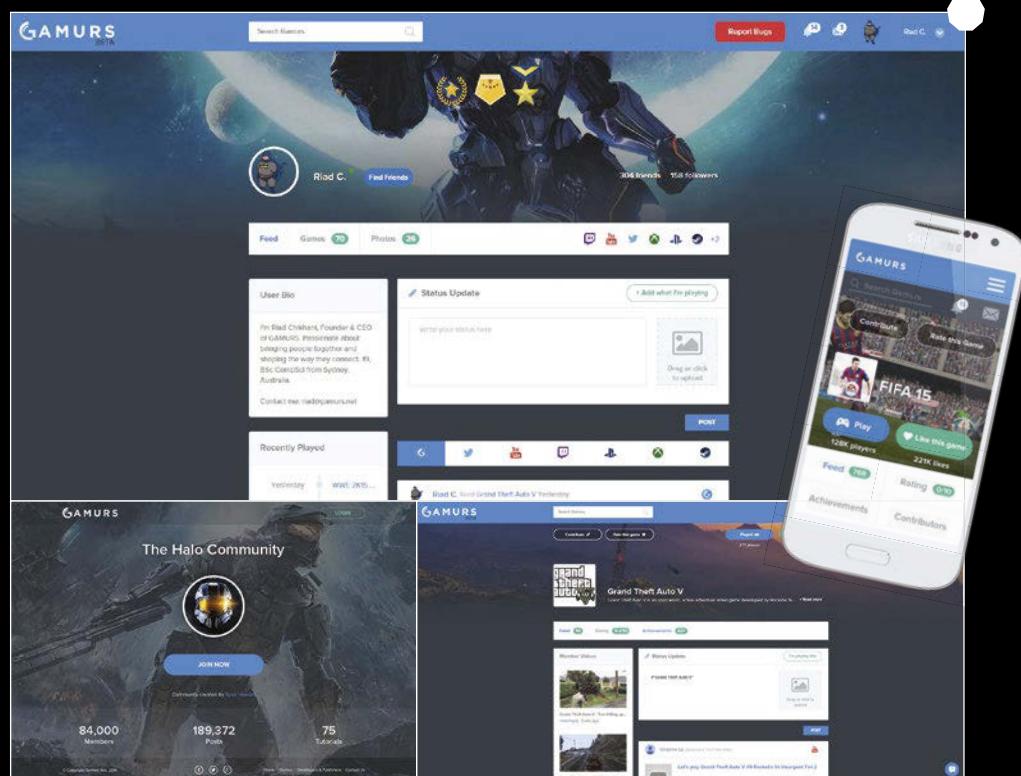
his HSC, the power of its example was never far from Riad's mind. And so, while studying computer science at the University of New South Wales, he began to expand on the idea, to play with the possibility of creating a social network not just for Runescape players, but for all gamers. Thus in late 2014 GAMURS was born.

THE SURCIAL NETWORK >> The easiest way to describe GAMURS (pronounced just like "gamers") is that it's Facebook for gamers. But that's actually a bit reductive and doesn't do justice to the full scope of the service. GAMURS is a platform agnostic social network and content aggregator that integrates gamer-centric services into a single intuitive Facebookish interface. Riad wants it to be your source for everything gaming related: news, current events, sharing achievements and trophies, and (of course) meeting and connecting with other gamers.

"Right now, we integrate your Xbox Live, PSN, Steam, Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, Battle.Net, RuneScape & League of Legends accounts," he explains. "Dependent on the game and its structure, we import your achievements and update them regularly – which automatically shares it with your friends and the community on the GAMURS feed."

Prior to developing and launching the platform, Riad and surveyed nearly 1500 gamers to find out what they wanted from a service like GAMURS. "What we saw was the focus on relevant, live content, while also a focus on friends and social groups that players want to connect with," he tells us. "A major thing we realised early on was that gaming is so dynamic, you cannot possibly cater for every single need that there is. This has given us the ability to focus on providing a solution for many of the problems that are evident, and then to focus on solving problems that smaller groups in gaming are facing."

TOO MUCH EFFORT? >> At this point, you might well be wondering: why should I bother? Why do we need a dedicated social network for gamers when we already have Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit? Granted, these aren't dedicated platforms, but there's no stopping you from sharing your achievements with friends, or tweeting a screenshot, or even starting up your own sub-reddit. On top of that, these platforms are already enmeshed in the fabric of our



everyday lives, whereas GAMURS is something new, some that we have to sign-up for and learn and get used to. So again, the question is: why bother?

It's obvious that Riad has been asked this question a bunch of times and, given its importance, it's no surprise that his answer is eloquent and convincing:

"Designers can go on Dribbble, musicians on Soundcloud, corporates on Yammer and LinkedIn, and you guessed it – friends on Facebook," he begins.

■ OUR GAMING LIFE IS SO DISPERSED ... GAMURS HELPS BY AGGREGATING ALL THE RELEVANT CONTENT ■

"Yet, when you're a gamer, you need to rely on numerous news sources such as IGN, Kotaku and Polygon – video content on YouTube and Twitch, media and modern communication in private Facebook groups and discussions and tutorials on forums. Our gaming life is so dispersed, so the way GAMURS helps is by aggregating all the relevant content for users, and providing them with a familiar and modern social platform for them to share their content while also meeting like-minded players."

In other words, you should go to the effort of signing up for Gamurs because, in the long run, it means

less effort overall. Instead of having to go to a dozen different sites to get your daily news and content, now you only need to go to one. Rather than discussing and sharing with friends over Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Steam, and all the rest, now you can do it all through GAMURS in a single window with a single interface and the same username. This, ladies and gentlemen, is convenience.

FURST AMONG EQUALS >>

GAMURS is not the only dedicated social network for gamers out there, but it clearly shaping up to be the best. Having recently secured extra funding via the NRMA's "Jumpstart" program, Riad and colleagues are planning a period of rapid expansion, introducing a variety of new features while consolidating and expanding their existing user base in the hope of attracting advertisers.

"We have a plethora of product releases in the funnel for the next 12-18 months, so before looking to monetise the platform, we must gauge the reception that these releases have with the users and where they're located on the market," he explains. "Our vision for GAMURS is to provide a complete environment for a members gaming life. So far, users really like the platform and have suggested countless methods of improving it, so we're pretty occupied putting all that into place moving forward. It's a great problem to have!" ■

TECH OF THE FUTURE

WITH COMPUTEX AND E3 OVER, IT'S TIME TO TAKE A LOOK AT SOME OF THE MOST APPEALING TECH ANNOUNCED OR DEMOED AT THE TWO PREMIER TRADE SHOWS.



CORSAIR BULLDOG

Available: TBA • RRP: Starts at \$399 USD

» The Bulldog DIY 4K Gaming PC is a Small Form Factor, barebones machine designed to squat inside your home theatre AV rack, and comes packing a bunch of features that make this the top dog in town. We're not too sure about the claims of it being 4K-ready, but it's definitely the most impressive basis for a small gaming PC we've seen.

It's what's inside the case that makes the Bulldog so special; this is one pedigree mutt throughout. For the suggested price tag of US\$399, it includes a bunch of goodies. A mini-ITX motherboard will form the backbone of your gaming PC, but Corsair hasn't decided which manufacturer to go with yet, only confirming that it'll run any Intel i7 or lower CPU. Keeping such a speedy chip cool in the confined space falls to the Hydro Series H5SF All-in-One liquid CPU cooler, which should also help keep annoying fan noise to a minimum. There's also an optional HG10 GPU cooler not included in the price and, when combined with the CPU cooler, the entire package aims to deliver no more than 30dB of annoying fan noise.

We'd expect such a jam-packed little critter to easily sell for \$700 or more, which makes the anticipated price point so damn exciting. Given Corsair's excellent reputation when it comes to cases and cooling, we don't doubt that the Bulldog will have one of the quietest barks on the block, but it's also got the capacity for one hell of a bite, provided you don't mind spending the necessary bucks to deck it out with top-shelf components. You can expect to find the Bulldog tearing through the competition in late 2015.

CORSAIR LAPDOG

Available: TBA • RRP: Starts at \$89 USD

» With the Bulldog aiming to be the alpha dog in the living room, gamers will need some way to play games from the comfort of their couch. A wireless Xbox controller will surely be a handy way to tame this little fella, but it lacks the accuracy serious FPS players need to dominate the battlefield. Enter the Lapdog, a keyboard and mousepad combination designed to bring your desk skills to the couch.

Looking like a stable table designed for gamers, this large slab of input goodness incorporates space for a keyboard alongside a mousepad. Foam padding underneath helps to keep it nice and stable, while a large chamber along the top edge will hide away all of those pesky USB cables. The price will start at US\$89 for the unit without a keyboard, increasing to US\$199 with a K65 keyboard.

We tried it out in Corsair's private demo suite, and found it to be one of the better lap-mounted gaming peripherals around, with a couple of caveats. Firstly, the cable-hiding chamber is far too large, and it encroaches on the vertical height of the mouse pad. Secondly, there's no wrist-rest, which feels a little strange if you're used to one. Thankfully Corsair is still tweaking the design, so hopefully these quirks will be ironed out by the time it's released in Q4 of this year.

MSI AX24

Available: 2015 • RRP: TBA

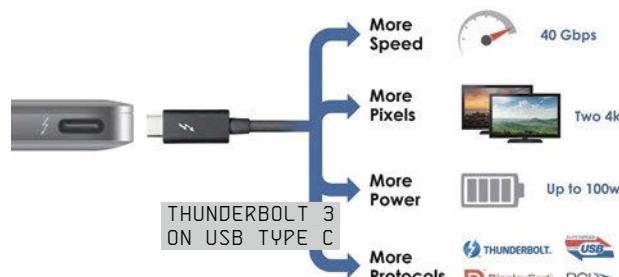
It's hard to sell people on the gaming viability of All in One systems, but with the AX24, MSI has a good chance of doing just that thanks to the upgradability of the platform and the fact that it makes a feature of the fact it can hold a full sized videocard. The 24" display is a little lacking in frills - it's only 1920x1280 in the current model - but a large shoebox style enclosure for the back mounted GPU shouts out the unit's potential power. MSI also says they are considering building a version of the AX24 with dual videocard support. If that doesn't sell gamers on the possibilities of AiO systems, nothing will.



IN WIN H-TOWER CONCEPT CHASSIS

Available: TBA • RRP: All the money

In Win have a history of making some rather extravagant cases available only through limited product runs. In the past they have had the S-Frame and the H-Frame, but the 2015 concept case, the H-Tower leaves them all in the dust in terms of both ambition and extravagance. Closed, the tower looks for the most part like a computer tower, but it's the way the case opens that makes it special. The Our gaming life is so dispersed four corners fold out like the opening of a metal flower while the internals get tilted up for easy access. Of course, this is all mechanised, because who has the time to actually open their PC.



THUNDERBOLT 3 ON USB TYPE C

Available: 2015 • RRP: Varies

Rather than trying to push their proprietary connector with Thunderbolt 3, the company has instead decided to join forces with their opposition to bring Thunderbolt 3 technology to the reversible USB Type-C connector. What this means in practical terms is some pretty damn future proof data transfer tech. Thunderbolt 3 is capable of 40Gbps throughput. By comparison, the newly released USB 3.1 is only capable of 10Gbps throughput. The other great advantage of Thunderbolt 3 is that it's a multipurpose cable, capable of transferring enough data to run two 4k screens, charge or power devices up to 100W, run display port and more. The first Thunderbolt 3 motherboards should be hitting shelves within the next few months, with the major push happening in 2016.

ACER PREDATOR X34

Available: Late 2015 • RRP: TBA

Big, beautiful curved ultra-wide screens were everywhere at Computex, but the Acer Predator X34 was definitely one of the most impressive on display. Boasting a 34 inch ultra-wide 21:9, 3440 x 1440 IPS panel, the Predator X34 is large enough to mostly negate the problems of vertical screen space that are common with the aspect ratio. What's more, the X34 features NVIDIA G-Sync technology. The pics don't really do the monitor justice. It's big, bright and crisp. The demo unit on the Computex show floor features three X34s rigged together. Thanks to the curve, this made for a rather spectacular, and immersive gaming environment.

ALIENWARE AREA 51

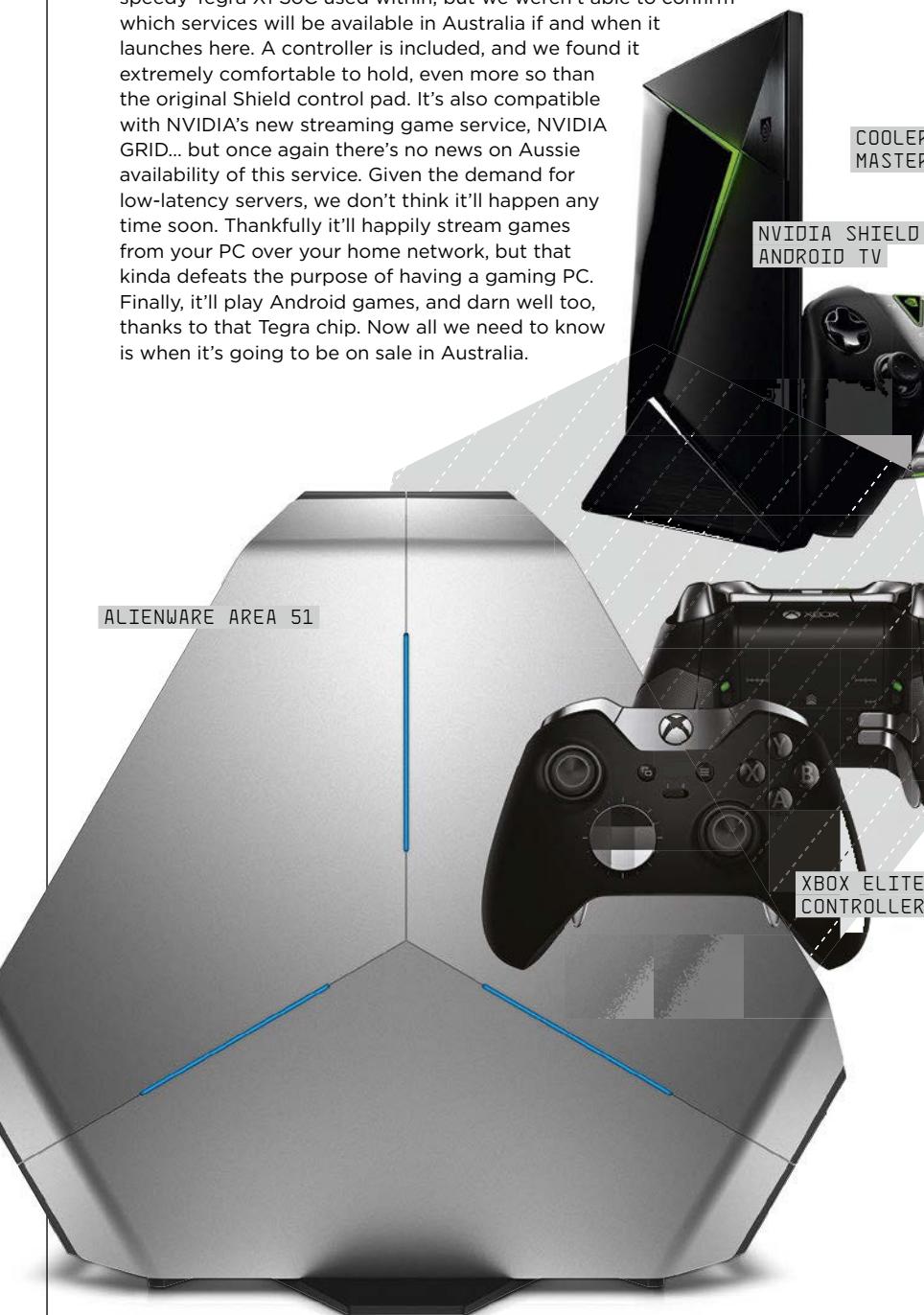
Available: Now • RRP: Starting at \$2849

» The Area 51 has been out for a while but it still deserves mention for being one of the most attractive looking desktop PCs around at the moment thanks to its award winning hexagonal case design. It's not a small or light machine by any means, but that isn't the purpose of the Area 51. It's designed for two purposes - maximum power and showing off. It's pretty damn good at both. The case can fit up to three top end video cards and gives ready access to all the internals for fairly easy upgrading. The case also provides surprisingly good airflow, so it only looks like some type of spaceship rather than sounding like one.

NVIDIA SHIELD ANDROID TV

Available: TBA • RRP: \$299.99 USD

» We also got a chance to check out the latest Shield product, which now seems to focus mainly on its Android TV functionality. It's capable of running 4K content thanks to the speedy Tegra X1 SoC used within, but we weren't able to confirm which services will be available in Australia if and when it launches here. A controller is included, and we found it extremely comfortable to hold, even more so than the original Shield control pad. It's also compatible with NVIDIA's new streaming game service, NVIDIA GRID... but once again there's no news on Aussie availability of this service. Given the demand for low-latency servers, we don't think it'll happen any time soon. Thankfully it'll happily stream games from your PC over your home network, but that kinda defeats the purpose of having a gaming PC. Finally, it'll play Android games, and darn well too, thanks to that Tegra chip. Now all we need to know is when it's going to be on sale in Australia.



COOLER MASTER

MASTERSOUNDS MAKER

Available: TBA • RRP: TBA

» The new company ethos of "Make it Yours" extends to Cooler Master's new headset, the MasterSounds Maker, which was easily one of the most innovative products at the show. These headphones use a modular design, allowing the user to swap in different drivers depending on their needs. The baseline set is tuned for games, but they can be swapped out for music or studio drivers, each of which lends the soundscape a different flavour. Changing the drivers is as simple as twisting the special knob in each earpiece, and screwing the replacement back in. It's a fantastic idea, but we're very keen to hear how they sound in action. They appear to be rather high-end cans, with built-in active environmental noise cancelling, as well as virtual 7.1 surround sound. Connectivity is also configurable, with the user able to choose from Bluetooth, wired or USB.

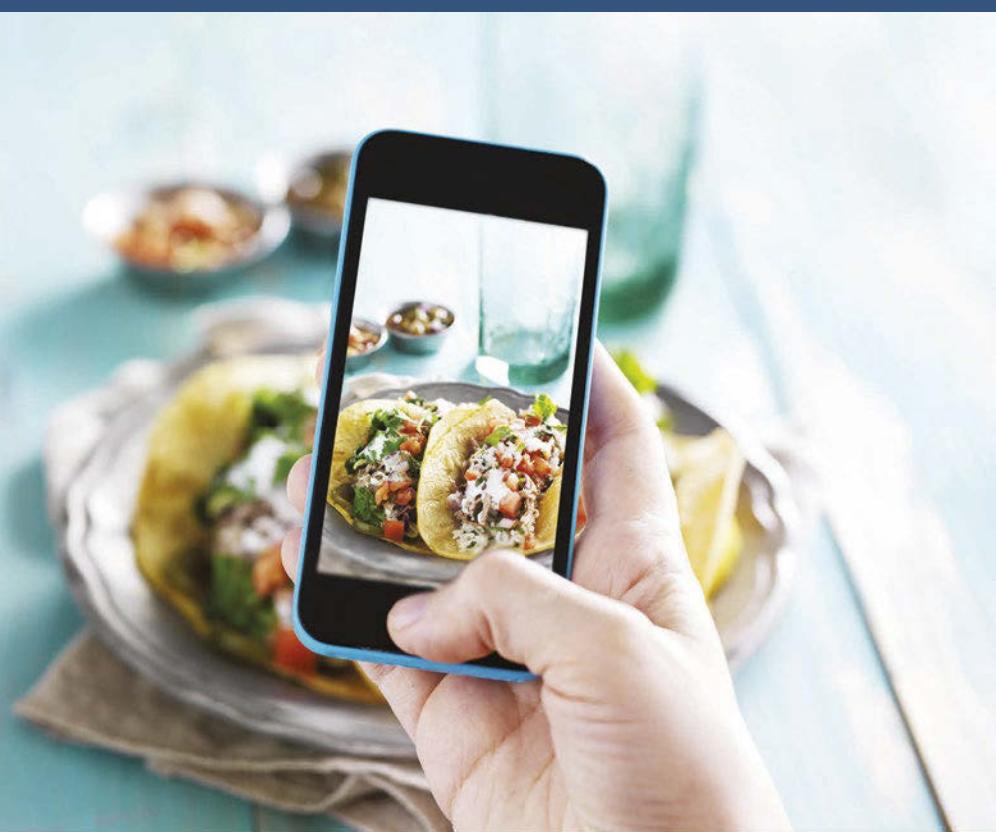


XBOX ELITE

CONTROLLER

Available: Q4 2015 • RRP: \$149.99 USD

» Somewhere around the \$200 AUD mark is a lot of money to pay for a game controller. When people think about a console peripheral for that kind of money the first things that come to mind are usually flight sticks, racing wheels or arcade style fighting sticks, not controllers. Price aside, the Elite controller looks like one of the nicest controllers around. It's built with adaptability in mind. The thumbsticks can be changed, with three different heights of stick being included, the D-Pad has two different form factors, removable flappy paddle style buttons under the grip of the controller can be hotkeyed to any face button or trigger and even the pull length of the triggers can be modified if you want a faster digital style action rather than analogue for shooters. The Elite controller has been built in conjunction with professional gamers - we're looking forward to seeing if it can improve our performances.

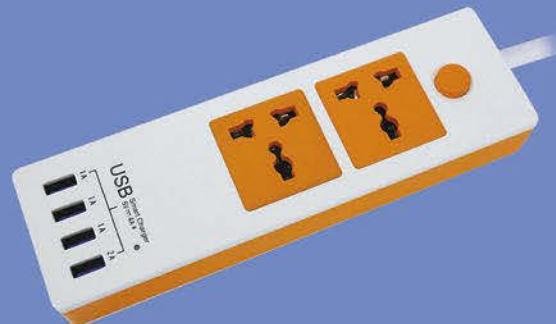


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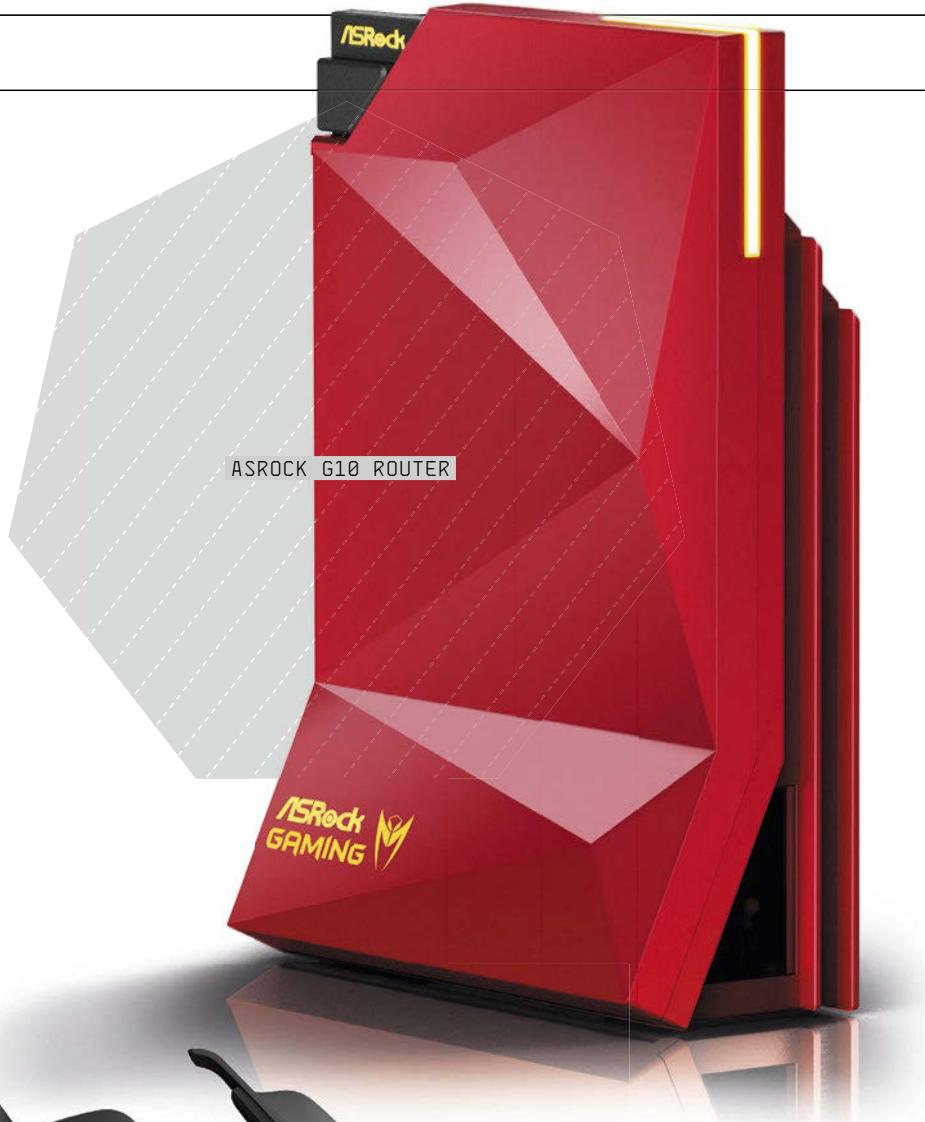
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ASROCK G10 ROUTER

Available: July • RRP: \$250 USD

Soaring straight to the top of our Most Wanted list is this stunning new router from ASRock. It's not just the outrageously gorgeous design of the exterior case; there's a lot to love inside as well. For starters, it's a 4T4R (4 transmitters, 4 receivers) 802.11ac router, which means that it's the first consumer router rated to deliver a throughput of 1733Mbps over a single WiFi application. There's one slight hitch with this - we don't know of any 4T4R WiFi cards for the PC, as the fastest we've seen so far is 3T3R in commercial applications.

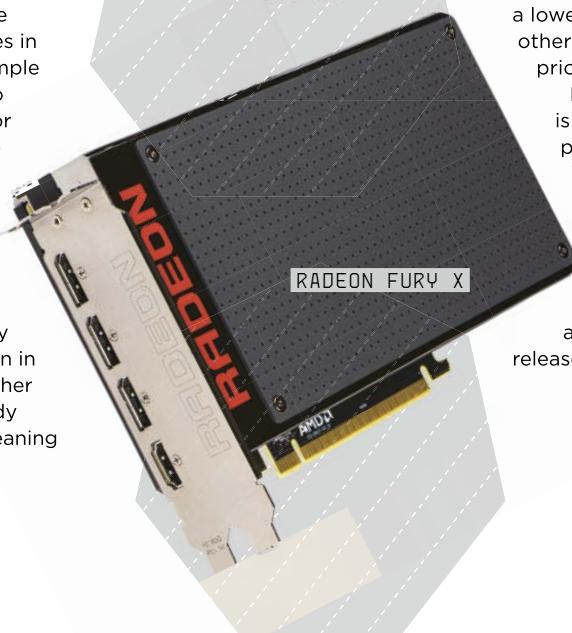
Even cooler is the hidden 2T2R WiFi dongle hidden in the top, which detaches to become a travel access point or HDMI dongle, enabling Miracasting. Sadly it can't be used as a WiFi dongle though. The final feather in this router's cap is the IR blaster hidden within, which can be programmed to run your IR-controlled gadgets remotely. Simply make sure the router is within view of your TV or airconditioner, and then you can control it remotely, setting your TV up to record a show while you're on the road, or turning your heater on 30 minutes before you get home. It's hard to believe that ASRock is anticipating selling this router for just US\$250 at the end of July, but if it can hit this price point it'll be the hottest selling router on the block.



ROCCAT NYTH MOUSE

Available: 2015 • RRP: TBA

Labelled as an MMO mouse, but in reality a mouse suitable for anyone interested in customising their experience, the Nyth not only features interchangeable sides to make it wider or thinner depending on your preference, it also features space for up to 16 side buttons that can be swapped, moved or removed entirely depending on need. The new Roccat Swarm drivers and software suite finally unifies the driver/software package, and from what we've seen, setting up button and user profiles in the software will be a breeze, with a simple drag and drop system allowing users to choose button placement and layout for each gaming profile. The company also promises to release templates for buttons online so users can 3D print their own unique buttons for an additional level of customisation. The mouse also features a rocker switch that sits between the first and middle fingers of the hand. It essentially takes the rocker functionality often seen in mouse wheels and transplants it to further up the body of the mouse. We're already envisaging this switch being used for leaning in FPS or quick swapping weapons.



RADEON FURY RANGE

Available: Now • RRP: \$979

The Fury X is the first release in a range of high-end graphics cards all based around the Fiji chip, debuting in Australia on June 25, and it's going to be the most expensive. With an Aussie recommended price of \$979, this water-cooled speed demon is AMD's new flagship graphics card. Soon after its launch will come Fury, an air-cooled version of the product at a lower price. AMD won't reveal any other changes to the Fury, but we expect fewer Stream Processors and/or a lower clock speed. If it's anything like other product releases, expect a sizeable price drop.

Finally there's the R9 Nano, which is just six inches long, making it the perfect product for tiny Mini-ITX cases.

With a TDP of just 175W, AMD claims it is the most power efficient high-end GPU on the market. It was this card that AMD showed off in its new Project Quantum miniature gaming PC, which measures just ten inches across, and which AMD expects will release sometime next year.

PROJECT MORPHEUS

Available: 2016 • RRP: TBA

At this year's E3, Sony finally showed off their Project Morpheus VR headset, and all reports say that it's shaping up to be one hell of a bit of kit. Thanks to Sony having prior experience with motion control technology, peripherals and controllers were already available for the games on display, enabling the entertainment giant to really show off the capabilities of the device with games ranging from a shooter featuring aliens, spiders and other beasties as well as a bike demo in which players could pedal a real exercise bike to ride through a fantasy landscape on a horse that transformed into a Pegasus if pedalled fast enough. Unlike the Oculus Rift, the Morpheus headset doesn't contain any built in speakers, meaning that the wearer will have to don a pair of headphones as well for a truly immersive experience.



PROJECT MORPHEUS

OCULUS RIFT

Available: Q1 2016 • RRP: TBA

The release date for the consumer version of the Oculus Rift, the first off the block in the race for VR superstardom, has finally been announced. Gamers can expect to be able to buy the headset in the first quarter of 2016, but little aside from that is known. The retail pricing and final specs have yet to be announced but it will apparently have improved resolution, head and position tracking. The proprietary controller, dubbed the Oculus Touch, which looks something like a standard console controller split in half and attached to a large ring won't be available at launch but should drop fairly soon after.



XBOX HOLOLENS

XBOX HOLOLENS

Available: TBA • RRP: TBA

Microsoft hasn't followed the lead of the other VR products with the HoloLens. Rather than opting for full VR, Microsoft has instead set their sights on augmented reality – overlaying gaming elements over a real world location. The unsurprising hit of the E3 demo was the HoloLens version of Minecraft, in which the game world was mapped to available surfaces in 3D. It's hard to put into words how amazing the game looked projected onto a simple table, rising up from the virtual depths to construct the blocky landscape. Another extremely promising demo, called Project X-Ray, was a simple shooter in which critters weave their way in and out of the environment forcing the player to move around, duck incoming attacks and generally look like a loon to anyone not playing. The HoloLens, unlike other VR headsets actually does the processing in the unit and runs the Windows 10 OS, so games will actually be processed in the unit rather than simply being shown. No pricing is available as yet, but we have been warned that the HoloLens will cost significantly more than an Xbox One.



OCULUS RIFT

GALAX VISION

Available: 2016 • RRP: \$200 USD (approx.)

It seems that everyone is sticking their toes into the VR pool. Galaxy, the company formerly known as Galaxy, have launched their own VR headset with the Vision. Unlike the majority of VR headsets, the Vision is not being launched as a premium product, but rather a budget approach to the realm of screens in front of your eyes. The specs are modest – 1080p, 60hz, 25ms response time – but so is the price tag. It will be interesting to see if there's any market for low end VR.

CRYSTAL BALLIN'

BEN MANSILL RECKONS HE KNOWS
WHAT'S COMING.

» You would think that predicting PC gaming tech trends would be a bit of a no-brainer. It should all be obvious. Take the sexiest looking stuff that's in development, and predict big things = futurefun, sometime soon. But things don't always pan out, and that's a good thing because the great minds said PC gaming was dying years ago and that we'd all be playing mobile games right about now, and that'd be a big fat sadness if it were true.

But let's have a stab at guesstimating the bigger tech trends. That's really not difficult because PC gaming is one of those things that's driven by fusing imaginary cool things that big kids dream of doing with emergent tech that can make it actually possible.

VR will be how we play everything

HOW AWESOME: SUPER • HOW LIKELY: UN

» All hardcore gamers will have an Oculus, or similar. That's a given. How could you not make owning one your highest priority? It's an entirely different experience. It's a mad trip. It's mind-expanding.

But it's also itchy and face-rubby, sweaty round the edges and it ruins your hairdo. You have to lift it to grab your chippies, beer, Coke or coffee. These are what science probably calls negative appeal factors. Then there's the relatively low res and the total certainty that many devs just won't bother tweaking their games to work right with VR.

Tonnes of game types will always work better with a monitor. VR will be saved for special awesomeness and that will be good, but don't expect to never buy another monitor again, because...





Monitors are getting sexy

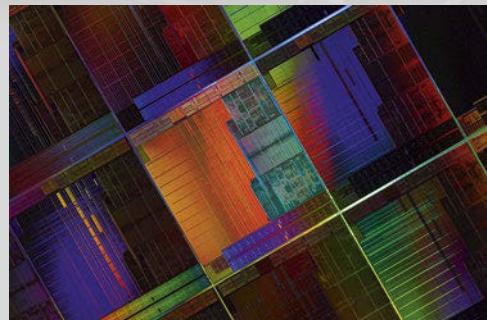
HOW AWESOME: EXPANSIVELY • HOW LIKELY: DEAD SET CERT

» Suddenly, out of nowhere, the people who make monitors started doing funky stuff. It's rather amazing and wonderful after a couple of decades where the only leap was CRT to LCD. All at once we have crazy-cool aspect ratios, mammoth dimensions, and actual technology to make gaming better along with resolutions to terrify any video card.

It's great! But it's still early days. The perfect gaming monitor is yet to be unleashed upon the world.

But, it will be soon. The coolest contender is Acer's X34. Daniel has the juice on that in our Tech of the Future feature, and it's a stunner. But it's not quite perfect. A little more vertical height would be welcome and support for FreeSync as well as G-Sync would be good too.

AMD and Nvidia each say that there's no restriction on these techs cohabitating a single screen, but it hasn't happened yet so there's something afoot for the future to solve.



Next-gen CPUs will make games amazing

HOW AWESOME: DONE IT ALREADY • HOW LIKELY: NOT REALLY, ACTUALLY

» Forever since the beginning, you pretty much had to upgrade your CPU every year to get all the game frames. Then, with the advent of Intel's Core CPUs, you suddenly didn't. Any decent Core CPU was good for two or three years, if not more. It's now not uncommon to see four or five years of solid service from a CPU. CPU-intensive games are relatively rare, helping the cause along nicely, too.

Eventually the time will come when you do need to upgrade, and the longer wait will probably warrant a need for a new motherboard and with that comes the latest mobo features, making the upgrade all the more exciting.



We will mostly play just one game

HOW AWESOME: QUITE • HOW LIKELY: BET THE FARM

» You know how that son or nephew or friend's kid who plays Minecraft, nothing but Minecraft, and Minecraft all the time? That is our future, and you can start preparing your blame sticks to smack Chris Roberts with.

I'm using Star Citizen as a fantastic example, but it won't be the only one, and it won't be the first. While various MMOs are addictive and absorbing, one can dip in and out, leave and return months later. But what bloody Chris Roberts, all hail his stellar magnificence, is doing, is an everything-in-one game. Space

combat and FPS, and strategic and tactical stuff, plus a billion absorbing little things to do in-game that are totally absorbing games in their own right. Like the recently announced passenger liner and the probability of virtual spacelines popping up in game.



PC gaming will shift to the living room TV

HOW AWESOME: **SOMEWHAT** • HOW LIKELY: **STEAMROLLING INEVITABILITY**

» Gabe Newell is a mighty good man, and he wants your TV. He also wants a slice of Microsoft's big OS cake, and if he gets his way he'll have it all, toppling Windows as the gamer's OS and relegating the desk to just be more horizontal storage in the home. That last change will take a few years before we have a clue if it will happen at all, but this year is where it all begins.

Is Steambox and Steam OS really all that great? It all smells like many things that have failed before, but it's all stacking up. The hardware is good, the funky controller remains an unknown but the OS has been out for long enough to know that it's definitely not a bad thing.

Nothing will ever prise us permanently from our PC desks, that shall always be the gaming throne room, but a dose of Civ on telly every now and then doesn't sound horrible.



Weird-arse VR controllers

HOW AWESOME: **INCOMPREHENSIBLY** • HOW LIKELY: **READY, SET...**

» Seeing isn't necessarily believing. Lifting your hands up for real and seeing your pretend textured polygonal arms mirror your movements in-game will tip you instantly into blissful gaming insanity.

If you think Oculus' own hand nunchucks look funky, wait until... the near future. Oculus bought the developer of something called the Nimble Sense peripheral earlier this year. Without wearing gloves it can mirror your individual finger movements. Spacey. And we've all seen demo vids of those crazy stand-inside-it 360 degree conveyor belt things. While they'll be only for rich kids and arcades, as fidelity improves you really will be there.

Expect weapons to hold that match what you see on screen, movement and actions included, and you can be sure clever peripheral companies like Razer are working overtime preparing some totally insane gaming magic.



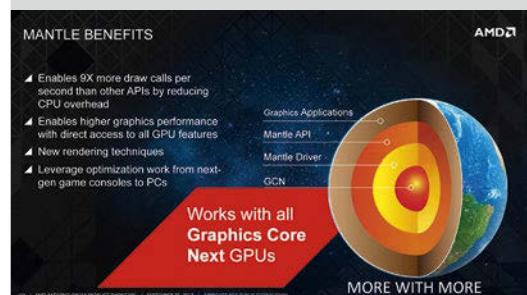
Low level APIs will deliver 10x the frames

HOW AWESOME: **SPECTACULARLY** • HOW LIKELY: **NOT QUITE 10X BUT STILL SUPER**

» DirectX 12 is coming to save us from the stutters, and the expensive video card upgrades all the time, and tolerating less than ultra graphics. So is Vulcan, the OpenGL standard which now includes the low-level API formerly known as AMD's Mantle.

So ok, we won't get 10x the FPS, but when supporting games start coming out it will be startling. Demos have proven the benefits, it's real, it's imminent. Maybe less so for Vulcan, but that sun may shine brightly in coming years when SteamOS takes over the world and its Linux base gives a mighty boost to the OpenGL standard, giving Microsoft and DX the finger forever.

But what with irony and all that, it may be that all the gains in performance are eaten up by our fancy new GPU-hungry 4k ultra widescreen monitor. Still, it's a net gain!



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DAVID HOLLINGWORTH UPGRADES TWO
KEY COMPONENTS TO REVITALISE HIS
NEARLY FIVE YEAR OLD GAMING PC. BUT IS
A NEW CARD AND MONITOR ENOUGH?



GTX 980 Ti

When NVIDIA launched its new GTX 980Ti series card in Sydney recently, it talked up a lot of the new hardware's capabilities. For one thing, it's built with being able to push a smooth VR experience, and has a load of tricks to bring ever higher framerates – and fidelity – to virtual reality. It's also aimed at the release of DirectX 12, alongside Windows 10, and can take advantage of the highest levels of the DX12 API. It's a fast, relatively quiet card that – NVIDIA claims – hits the sweet spot between price and performance, and is the perfect single-card solution for enjoying 4K gaming.

Curiously, during a lot of their presentation, performance was compared to the rather elderly GTX 680 card. The previous 7- and 8-series cards were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps NVIDIA think there's a lot of old GTX 680s out there, and there's certainly a sizeable percentage of those cards still in circulation on the Steam Hardware Survey. And, as it so happens, it also happens to be the card that's been sitting in my gaming PC for the last few years.

Sounds like time to see what a couple of key upgrades can do for my four year old PC!

The only thing I've upgraded since building my current system is the 680 itself, which replaced an old AMD card when I got sick of AMD's terrible driver support (which has really only gotten worse). Otherwise, everything is original. The system's built around a Core i7 990X that's showing no signs of slowing down, plugged into a first-generation GIGABYTE G1 Sniper motherboard. This is backed up by 8GB of RAM, a couple of 1TB hard drives, and an SSD for my system drive. It's given me rock solid performance for years, but lately it's started to show signs of age.

My usual default – install new game, set graphics to Ultra, enjoy – has given away to a certain degree of fiddling to get games running smooth. And new games, such as Grand Theft Auto V and The Witcher 3? Well, that becomes a LOT of fiddling to get a smooth framerate. This suggests to me that if I'm going to keep up with AAA graphics, my system needs some kind of kick in the pants to get it back up to speed.

What I'm curious about is whether the GTX 980Ti will be let down by the older components, and if I need to build an entirely new system. And, since I'm upgrading anyway, I want to put the system to the ultimate test, and see what it can do hooked up to a 4K Acer XB280HK Gsync monitor (my current one's Gsync too, by the way). Truth be told, I'm actually curious to see what the 4K experience is like, and pushing my older CPU that hard will really show if it's acting as bottleneck.

To measure performance, I'm looking at a selection of the games I regularly play – Battlefield 4, World of Warships,



The Acer XB280HK Gsync – the 4K future is now

and Grand Theft Auto V. Synthetic benchmarks are all well and good, but I want to see what real world performance I'm getting.

MEASURING THOSE FRAMES >> To start with, let's see what my old system is capable of. Running at 1920 x 1080, World of Warships runs at a more than respectable average of 70 frames per second even on Very High settings, though one iceberg laden map drops the frames to a low of 39. Wargaming makes its games for a wide array of systems, so it's no surprise it runs well. Battlefield 4, with some settings tweaked down

**FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE
4K IS WAY MORE
RESOLUTION THAN THEY
NEED, BUT FOR A GAMER,
IT'S NEXT LEVEL STUFF**

from max, runs at around 48 frames per second, which is pretty good. Grand Theft Auto V, however... wow.

In GTA Online, I can get a smooth 54 frames driving around, and 34 when the action heats up. However, in the Campaign, that drops down to a mere 20 frames per second, and a staggering four frames per second when the map zooms in on your location after you respawn. Just for yucks, I ran The Witcher 3, and it struggled at 22fps.

So that's pretty clear – modern games really are starting to push my PC, almost to breaking point. So, out with the old, and in with the new! And, boy, it's like night and day, with zero sign of my older

hardware holding my machine back. Unsurprisingly, there's no change with World of Warships – it's already pushing as many frames as it can. BF4 jumps madly, and can now run at max settings, netting a minimum frame rate of 98fps. I maxed out Grand Theft Auto V and it managed a smooth 63 frames per second, and scoffed at even the most hectic of police shootouts.

All that was fine, but what about pushing 4K resolutions? Will my hardware hold me back this time?

Interestingly, we finally saw a drop in World of Warship's frame rate, down to a 'mere' 52fps average. Grand Theft Auto lost only a few frames, delivering 54fps, which actually supports one of NVIDIA's claims – that its new card is even better with high resolution performance. Annoyingly, by this time, BF4 needed patching, but we went back to The Witcher 3. It had been running at extremely limited settings, but even maxed out and at 4K it was running at a playable 24-28 frames per second.

And it looked stunning. For a lot of people 4K is likely way more resolution than they need, but for a gamer, it is amazingly next level stuff. The rigging on ships in World of Warships was crisp and well-defined, the animation and reflections in GTA super-smooth, and the lighting in The Witcher 3... well, it was life-changing – for a gamer.

Of course, it's not a cheap combination. You're looking at basically \$2,000 for the card and the monitor, so it's about the same price as a whole new rig. But what it does for your enjoyment of games is incredible, and it's a mighty piece of future proofing.

Even on a four-year-old system. ▶

THE FUTURE OF...

DAN STAINES TAKES A PEEK AT THE TECHNOLOGIES AND TECHNIQUES THAT'LL POWER THE GAMES OF TOMORROW

This is a special issue of Hyper dedicated to the games of the future: new titles that are all but guaranteed to blow our collective minds and push the medium in exciting new directions. But what about the technology that makes all that envelope-pushing possible? We're not talking hardware, but software: the engines, the renderers, the AI routines, the audio mixers – all the code that throbs heartlike beneath the hood of the games we enjoy, translating concepts and designs into playable reality. What does the future hold for them?

...ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

When we think of artificial intelligence (AI) in videogames, the first things that come to mind are... what? Enemies? Companions? Homicidal science-obsessed songstresses with a hatred of all things human? The truth, though, is that AI is a broad category encompassing everything from the behaviour of virtual agents to game logic to level generation to multiplayer matchmaking. It is also the one component of videogames that stands to undergo the most radical transformation and development in the next 5-10 years.

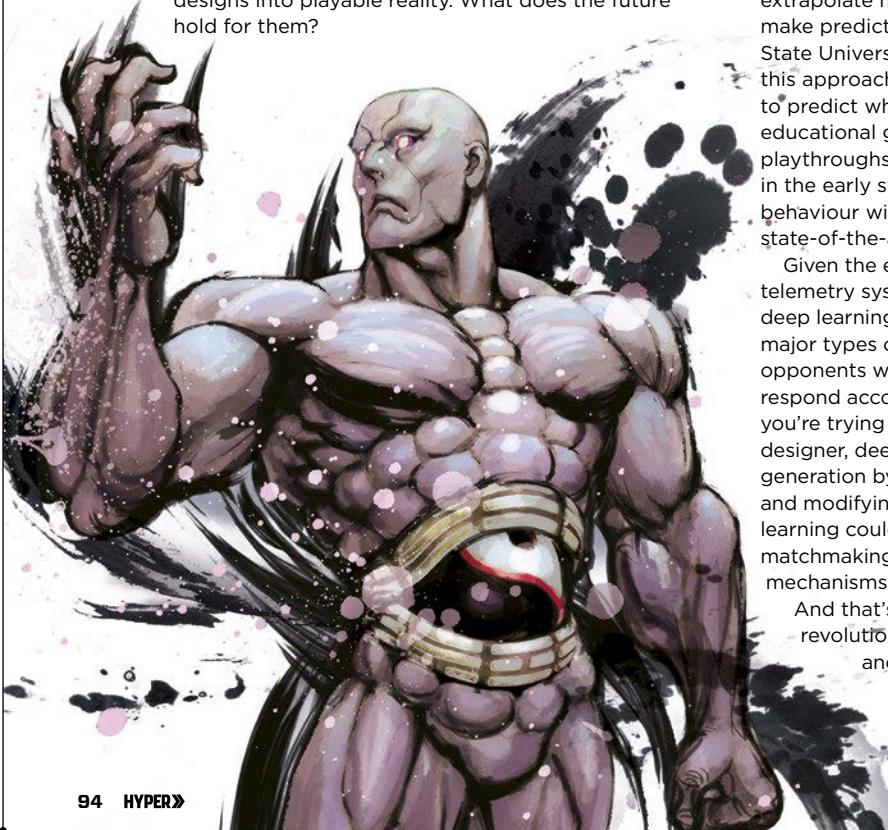
CURRENT STATE OF PLAY >> In their paper, *AI for Game Production*, authors Mark Reidl and Alexander Zook identify three major roles for AI in games: AI as actor, AI as designer, and AI as producer. The first refers to the common picture of AI as virtual agent: i.e. opponents and enemies, non-player characters, and companions. This category also includes omniscient "drama manager" agents like those featured in *Left 4 Dead* and *Darkspore*. The second category refers to AI's that manage tasks like procedural level generation and dynamic difficulty adjustment, but also encompasses AIs that literally design games from scratch, such as *ANGELINA*. The third, AI as producer, is a broader category that involves managing the overall player experience within and across particular games and includes things like analytics and matchmaking services.

At present, all three categories of AI are generally managed using complex decision-tree algorithms and local datasets. However, with the ongoing development of so-called "deep learning" AI and the ever increasing availability of telemetry data from gaming and non-gaming sources, there's a strong chance this approach – with all its inherent limitations – will become a thing of the past. We are, in short, on the cusp of an AI revolution.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS >> So what is deep learning? At its most basic, it describes a kind of machine learning in which AIs extrapolate meaningful patterns from large collections of data and make predictions based on that. Researchers at North Carolina State University recently demonstrated the potential applicability of this approach to game design by constructing an algorithm to predict what players were attempting to accomplish in an educational game called *Crystal Island*. Drawing on recorded playthroughs of only 137 different players, the algorithm – still in the early stages of development – was able to predict player behaviour with over 60% accuracy, a 20% jump on the previous state-of-the-art.

Given the enormous amount of data routinely recorded by the telemetry systems embedded in videogames, the potential for deep learning algorithms to enhance the functionality of all three major types of AI is near limitless. For AI as actors, we're talking opponents who can accurately predict what you're doing and respond accordingly, and companions who "understand" what you're trying to achieve and can meaningfully assist. For AI as designer, deep learning could assist in the process of procedural generation by accurately modelling player goals and capabilities and modifying output accordingly. For AI as producer, deep learning could assist in the development of more sophisticated matchmaking protocols and more robust automated anti-cheating mechanisms.

And that's just for starters. The fact is, deep learning AI could revolutionise almost every facet of how games are designed and played. It's an exciting, almost scary proposition... and it's just around the corner.



...GRAPHICS AND RENDERING

Rendering is the process by which 3D models and 2D sprites are generated into images on your monitor. Without renderers, you don't have visuals, and without visuals you don't have games. This is of course makes renderers rather important, and so the history of videogames is in part defined by progress towards more sophisticated and efficient rendering techniques.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY >> The most commonly used rendering technique in games today is called rasterisation, which works by identifying the vertices (or outlines) of a triangle and filling in the pixels between them. Combine a whole bunch of rasterised triangles into a single scene and you get polygons and then... well, graphics. Rasterisation's popularity is attributable to its efficiency, which is due in part to the amount of time, effort, and money that has been invested into developing hardware designed to accelerate the process.

However, there are a number of limitations associated with rasterisation. The most obvious is that the process only draws geometry and does not account for the way that light propagates and interacts with objects in a scene. When simulated light hits a rasterised object, it does so on a per-object basis and does not refract or create shadows the way real light would. For that, developers need to employ labour-intensive techniques like texture filtering and environment mapping. Over time, these stopgaps have become more and more sophisticated and efficient at creating the illusion of genuine global illumination, but they are always just that - illusions, and always identifiable as such.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS >> Ray tracing is a technique that is almost as old as rasterisation and has been widely used to render graphics for television and film since the 80s. It works by shooting rays of light out from the viewer's perspective ("camera") and tracing their trajectory on a per-pixel basis as they interact with objects in a scene. Like real photons, these virtual light rays bounce from object to object, taking on the colour and properties of each and propagating them naturally across the entire scene, creating shadows and reflections in the process. Properly tuned, the result is lighting that is more or less indistinguishable from the real thing - which is why *Avatar*, *Age of Ultron*, and most other big budget CG extravaganzas make extensive use of the technique.

The problem with ray tracing, though, is that it's extremely computationally expensive. For something like *Avatar*, you're looking at rendering times of hours per frame, which is of course completely unsuitable for gaming. However, as experimental projects like *Quake Wars: Ray Traced* and *Wolfenstein: Ray Traced* demonstrate, it's possible to employ ray tracing algorithms in playable real-time if you can harness the computational muscle of multiple networked processors working in parallel. Obviously, linking up 20 high end PCs is beyond the means of most people, but it is not beyond the means of the massive corporations like Sony and Microsoft who are aggressively pursuing cloud computing services for their respective platforms.

So while we probably won't have processors and GPUs capable of real-time ray tracing in the next decade, cloud computing and parallel processing could very well take up the slack in the meantime. (Now we just need the internet infrastructure to support it...)



...PHYSICS

Physics have been an integral part of videogames since pretty much forever. Even Pong models (in a very rudimentary way) phenomena like velocity, acceleration, and kinetic force. These days, videogame physics generally refers to stuff like ragdoll animations, deformable bodies, particle systems, and fluid dynamics. In other words, when we talk about videogame physics today, we're talking about simulating enormously complex systems consisting of dozens, hundreds, thousands of interacting components, each with their own unique physical properties. Havok and Half-Life's gravity gun are just the tip of the iceberg.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY >> At the moment, most physics simulations in videogames are based on something called rigid body dynamics. In these systems, objects – people, cars, buildings etc. – are rigid in the sense that they do not deform with the application of an external force. For example, a rigid body car that crashes at full speed into a brick wall doesn't crumple the way a real car does; instead what usually happens is that either one part of the rigid-body or the entire model is swapped for a damaged variant as defined in advance by programmers and artists.

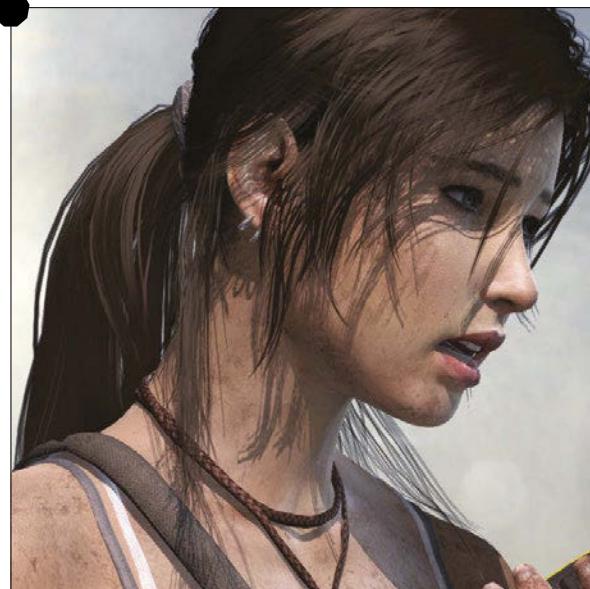
In contrast, soft body dynamics describes objects that can be deformed with the application of force. With advances in processing power, soft body physics has become more common in games as a means to model things like hair, cloth, and fluid. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of computational power required to do soft body calculations on a large scale has meant that its application has remained strictly limited, and is for the most part confined to generating more appealing eye candy.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS >> However, with continued advances in processing power and the further development of physics middleware like Havok and nVidia's PhysX, we can expect to see soft body dynamics used to model much

more than ponytails and billowing drapes. For instance, in BeamNG's hugely impressive tech demo for its self-titled physics engine, soft body dynamics are used to model cars which deform and break apart in a very satisfying and realistic manner upon impact. According to BeamNG, the cars are comprised of multiple soft body components through which forces propagate naturally, more or less like a real car. What this means is that, instead of having artists set up a bunch of "crash" prefabs that are triggered on collision, all that's necessary is to instantiate the physical constants – laws, basically – that govern object interaction and then let the system do its thing.

Broadly applied, soft body dynamics could be used to model everything from more realistic ragdolls to completely deformable terrain. However, with all this potential comes significant challenges. No matter how sophisticated they are, physics systems don't exist in a vacuum: if they're to be used for anything more than eye candy, developers need to overcome a number of pressing problems, the most pertinent being how to turn robust physics into satisfying gameplay and how to design AI to successfully navigate the more complex worlds of which it is suddenly a part. It's all well and good to design a destructible world, but what happens when the player blows a hole in the edge of a level? And what does the AI do when faced with terrain that can be completely different from one moment to the next?

These aren't easy questions to answer. For now, though, at least we can look forward to more badass car crashes and realistic hairdos.



...AUDIO

Historically neglected by manufacturers and marketers looking for attention-grabbing back-of-the-box bulletpoints, audio is an underappreciated but crucial element of modern videogame development. Encompassing everything from music to sound effects to voice acting as well as all the mixing, mastering, and production that goes on behind the scenes, a game without good audio is like a life without good music – hollow.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY >> As technology has advanced and sound designers have found themselves less limited by the constraints of primitive hardware, the quality of audio in videogames has become more or less indistinguishable from its counterparts in film and television. Current gen consoles allocate roughly 300 megabytes of memory to audio – ten times more than the previous generations – and this, in conjunction with the space afforded by modern storage media, has allowed sound designers and composers more flexibility in how they produce and implement audio in their games.

Whereas game audio used to be primarily procedural – i.e. synthesised – the norm now is to pre-record sound effects and music using standard production software and then simply store it for playback, usually using middleware like FMOD and WWise to apply effects like reverb, filters, and compression at runtime. However, synthesis has come a long way in the last twenty years, and now we see big budget games like GTA V making use of procedural audio once more. As synthesis technology continues to evolve, this trend is likely to become more prevalent.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS >> As you might expect, the availability of more sophisticated audio hardware and runtime codecs will have a profound impact on the way audio is designed for games. Most games are already designed with object-oriented 3D positional audio and will soon begin to take advantage of object-oriented 3D positional surround hardware (e.g. Dolby Atmos) as it becomes available in the home consumer market.

What this means is that, as well as hearing sound effect from the left, right, front, and behind, you'll also hear them from above and below. Oh, but don't worry if you haven't got the cash/inclination to purchase an 11.1 speaker setup: the traditional head-related transfer functions (HRTF) used to simulate 3D audio in headphones and 2.1 speaker setups is also becoming more sophisticated and is already on the cusp of mimicking the immersive positional audio setups used in movie theatres.

Going back to procedurality and synthesis, the technology is already at a point now where it is possible to synthesise realistic sound effects at runtime, freeing up much needed storage space and liberating sound designers from the time-consuming task of recording vast libraries of effects. What's lacking are standards and tools. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of professional audio recording and production suites currently available – the same cannot be said for procedural audio tools, limiting its adoption to developers who have the time, expertise, and money necessary to produce their own proprietary systems.

But as in-development software like tsugi's GameSynth become available, the benefits of procedural audio will become harder for developers to ignore. It's also possible that, as speech synthesis software like Vocaloid and NeoSpeech TTS become more sophisticated, even voice acting performances will be procedurally generated. But that's a ways off yet.





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